

Adventures in Fanfiction

Subversa's

His Draught
of
Delicate
Poison

A Valentine from an Alternate Universe

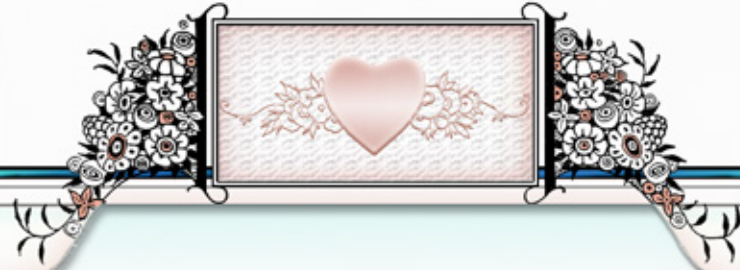
This story is based on The Grand Sophy by Georgette Heyer.

The Potterverse, in all its heartbreak and glory, belongs to the inimitable JKR



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THOU ART NOT LEVELLER THAN LILACS, — NO,
NOR HONEYSUCKLE; THOU ART NOT MORE FAIR
THAN SMALL WHITE SINGLE POPPIES, — I CAN BEAR
THY BEAUTY; THOUGH I BEND BEFORE THEE, THOUGH
FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, NOT KNOWING WHERE TO GO,
I TURN MY TROUBLED EYES, NOR HERE NOR THERE
FIND ANY REFUGE FROM THEE, YET I SWEAR
SO HAS IT BEEN WITH MIST, — WITH MOONLIGHT SO.

LIKE HIM WHO DAY BY DAY UNTO HIS DRAUGHT
OF DELICATE POISON ADDS HIM ONE DROP MORE
TILL HE MAY DRINK UNHARMED THE DEATH OF TEN
EVEN SO, INURED TO BEAUTY, WHO HAVE QUAFFED
EACH HOUR MORE DEEPLY THAN THE HOUR BEFORE,
I DRINK — AND LIVE — WHAT HAS DESTROYED SOME MEN.

Edna St. Vincent Millay



The Noble House
of Black
(Phoenix House behind)



1

SEVERUS SNAPE entered the study of number twelve, Grimmauld Place with a certain amount of trepidation. The entire Wizarding world had been turned on its collective ear, and any summons from Albus Dumbledore most likely represented a headache he could well do without.

The headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry smiled at his Potions master, and gestured for him to be seated. "Sit down, my boy, sit down. I don't have to ask how you're doing, you look very fit. How are your lovely sisters?"

Snape disposed his long limbs in the chair across the desk from Dumbledore and raised his eyebrows. "My *half*-sisters are in good health, Headmaster, and they will no doubt shorten my life span by fifty years." Feeling that the proprieties had been observed, he said, "You implied that it was urgent?"

The study door opened and a house-elf entered,



bearing a tea tray; Minerva McGonagall followed the house-elf into the room, indicating that she wished to have the tray placed on the desk. The elf complied and bowed himself out.

“Good afternoon, Severus,” Professor McGonagall said. “I trust your sisters are well?”

Snape closed his eyes in a gesture of long-suffering patience and replied, “Blooming, Minerva, thank you.”

McGonagall seated herself next to Snape and began to pour tea. “The oldest girl is subject to the Law, is she not?”

Snape accepted a cup of unsweetened tea from the older woman. “Skye is nineteen years old. She is indeed subject to the Law.”

Minerva passed a cup of tea, liberally sweetened and lightened, to Dumbledore. “The war was a tragedy — a travesty — for all of us. Why the Ministry felt it was necessary to further complicate our lives — to intrude, and invade our privacy! — I will never understand.”

Dumbledore surveyed her over the tops of his half-moon spectacles. “We lost too many of our best and brightest in fighting the Death Eaters, Minerva. The Ministry felt it necessary to encourage those who survived to begin at once to heal the wounds we were dealt.”

Snape snorted behind his teacup, and Minerva immediately spoke in support of his incredulity. “To encourage us to heal the wounds! You mean to force us into mar-

riages and childbearing! It is outrageous!”

Dumbledore tried a smile. “Scarcely to force *us* into anything, my dear. We are both past the ages specified in the Law.”

Snape muttered something, and Minerva looked over to him. “Well, Albus, you cannot say the same for poor Severus! He is certainly in the pertinent age group!”

Snape placed the teacup on the table between his and McGonagall’s chairs. “My situation is in a fair way to being resolved, Minerva.”

Dumbledore turned a sharp blue-eyed stare upon him. “In what way is your situation resolved, Severus?”

Snape sat up straighter in his chair. “I offered for Fleur Delacour this morning. She and her family have accepted my suit.”

Dumbledore and McGonagall stared for a moment too long before hastening to extend their congratulations.

Snape flicked his fingers impatiently. “Yes, thank you. The wedding is planned for September.” His thin lips tightened. “You asked to see me today for a particular reason, I believe, sir?”

Dumbledore put his teacup back on the tray and folded his hands on the desk before him. “You know how we are situated here, Severus. Minerva and I have six girls living here...”

Snape interrupted. “What became of the boys?”

McGonagall said, “Sirius was able to rent the house

behind this one; the back gardens are separated by a gated fence. He and Remus are looking after the boys over there.”

McGonagall was surprised to note that Snape could tighten his mouth even further. “Why isn’t Black living in his *own* home?” he inquired waspishly.

“Sirius Black left this house when he was sixteen years old and never wanted to come back,” Dumbledore said, in a tone of quiet reproof. “As you well know, Severus, it was a cruel punishment for him to be confined here for months on end. He is much happier across the way.”

Snape shrugged impatiently. “Yes, fine, good for Black. Why did you wish to see *me*, Headmaster?”

There was a knock on the study door, to which Dumbledore responded, “Come in.”

The door opened, and a face framed in the unmistakable Weasley red hair peeked around the edge.

“Yes, Miss Weasley?” Dumbledore said.

“Pardon me, Headmaster. Katie and I were wanting to know if you or Professor McGonagall need anything from Diagon Alley? We have some errands to run there this afternoon.”

McGonagall spoke up. “You’re not going alone, Miss Weasley?”

“No, ma’am. Professor Lupin is going with us — and some of the boys.”

“Is Professor Lupin here now?” Dumbledore inquired.

The study door opened wider, giving all of the occu-



pants of the room the opportunity to see the small crowd milling about in the hallway. Lupin was speaking quietly to Seamus Finnegan and Neville Longbottom in the sitting room doorway, while Katie Bell fastened her cloak about her shoulders. Lupin looked around and spied the gathering in the study. Striding across the hallway, he entered the room, smiling at McGonagall, and offering a handshake to Snape. With the headmaster’s eyes upon him, Snape had no choice but to stand and shake the werewolf’s hand.

“Severus! Good to see you. I hope your sisters are well?” Lupin said in his hoarse voice.

“Why are all of the members of the Order so interested in my half-sisters?” Snape demanded.

Lupin quirked an eyebrow at the affronted Potions master. “Are we? Forgive us, Severus, but we never knew you *had* sisters until recently. We are anxious to meet them.”

Snape scowled. “I hardly think it likely, Lupin.”

Dumbledore spoke up quickly. “We don’t have any commissions for you in Diagon Alley, Remus. Have a pleasant afternoon!”

Lupin took the hint and beat a hasty retreat, herding Ginny Weasley from the room, and galvanizing all of the young people out into the pleasant sunshine. McGonagall closed the door behind them with a snap, and turned to Snape.

“We need your help, Severus.”

Snape felt a sinking sensation, but offered a face of polite



interest to her. "How can I be of service to you, Minerva?"

Dumbledore spoke up. "You know how important it is for us to help the young people over this difficult time as much as we possibly can..."

McGonagall interrupted him, speaking forcefully. "We feel it is our moral duty to give them every chance to pair off with a partner whom they can truly love — with whom they can live happy, productive lives..."

She cleared her throat, showing some discomfort. "It is also our aim to keep them relatively chaste until they have contracted a betrothal..."

"Which means that you are closely chaperoning the girls and allowing the boys to run wild?" Snape inquired nastily.

Dumbledore smiled at him. "Something like that, Severus. You *do* understand that Minerva and I have been serving as the house parents for the young witches residing here? It gives them the opportunity to attend the Ministry-sponsored social functions this summer, to meet the young wizards in natural circumstances..."

Snape stood abruptly. "There is nothing natural about this whole damnable business! I would like to see the Muggle government attempt something like this! There would be rioting in the streets!"

Dumbledore watched his Potions master, his calm unruffled. "But we aren't Muggles, Severus. The Ministry

had the votes necessary to pass the Marriage Law. If our young people don't marry and reproduce, we will die out in less than four generations. It is unpleasant, but necessary."

Snape glared down at him. "To make it a requirement for all wizards between the ages of seventeen and seventy marry for the purpose of reproduction is barbaric!"

McGonagall interpolated. "And don't forget about the witches. All witches between the ages of seventeen and fifty! It is difficult for both the young men and the young women, Severus."

Snape struggled with himself for a moment. "I am still at a loss to see what any of this has to do with you asking to see me today."

Dumbledore smiled at him, and indicated with his hands that Snape and McGonagall should sit down, which they did. Dumbledore then busied himself pouring out more tea for each of them.

"Severus, I must travel to Bulgaria for the International Confederation of Wizards Congress. I am requesting that you bring your family here to live while I am away, so that you may assist Minerva with the young women and their courting."

"That's impossible, Headmaster. Since my father's death, the care of his wife and my half-sisters falls to me. Both my father's widow and my eldest sister are subject to the Law. They are, necessarily, my first priority."

Dumbledore stirred milk into his sweetened tea, studying Snape astutely. "This house is large enough to house you and your family in comfort, Severus. Living in town will give you the opportunity to see your fiancée more frequently, as well as give your eldest sister a chance to mingle with the other young people who have gathered about for the Ministry functions." Dumbledore made eye contact with Snape and spoke in a stern voice. "As you know, the entire purpose of opening this house, and having the young women stay here, is to protect them from Death Eater retaliation. We haven't put all of them in prison yet, Severus. If I am to go away, I need someone here, in my place, in whom I can place my entire trust. Will you help me?"

Snape felt the dull knife of obligation and duty twist in his gut. Would he never be free of these bonds? Would he ever be permitted to make a choice based entirely on his own desires?

"Yes, Headmaster, I will do as you wish."

Dumbledore beamed at him. "Excellent! I knew I could count on you, my boy."

McGonagall stood, and crossed behind him, patting him on the shoulder as she passed. "Thank you, Severus. I will feel so much better, knowing you are here to help me protect the girls."

When she reached the door, she turned back to him. "Albus is leaving on Monday next. Can you have your family moved in by then?"

"Yes, I believe I can."

Dumbledore stood, and crossed to the door also. "Oh, Severus, by the way, Miss Johnson will be leaving us this weekend; her engagement to Oliver Wood was just announced. Hermione Granger's parents are going to Ibiza for the summer, and Miss Granger will be coming to us for the two months they are gone."

Dumbledore and McGonagall both turned in some alarm at the sound of shattering china and discovered Snape wiping the spilled tea from his trousers with his handkerchief.

"I will take *care* of it, thank you!" he snarled at the two interfering busybodies, as he wrapped his bloody hand in the handkerchief and waved his wand with a jab that caused the shards of china to imbed themselves in the wooden desktop.

SNAPE **PROWLED** the floors of the thrice-damned Black house until he discovered a room he could convert to his own use. He needed a place where he could gather his thoughts, see to his correspondence and article writing, get

some reading done, and escape from the excess estrogen saturating the air. The “Noble and Most Ancient” House of Black housed a library which none of the Order of the Phoenix members had ever cared to risk decontaminating. Snape cast the necessary diagnostic spells on the room, and then went through the books, shelf by shelf, until he had disarmed the chamber. The volumes which could not be disarmed, he placed into a stout wooden cupboard in the corner of the room, then warded the doors so that no one but he could open them. Once the library had been sufficiently incapacitated, he requested the house-elves to give it an extra-thorough cleaning.

Dobby and Winky were house-elves who had been employed in the kitchens at Hogwarts; they were brought to number twelve, Grimmauld Place by Dumbledore to assist Kreacher with the housekeeping. It did not take Dobby and Winky long to take the measure of Kreacher, and they soon took to behaving as if he were not even present, much less the ranking servant of the house. Between the two of them, they had the library shiny and sweet-smelling in less than a day. Snape could not have been more relieved to have space of his own into which he could retire to obtain some measure of peace.

Conforming to Minerva McGonagall’s express wishes, the household was run as if the inhabitants of the house

were a family, meeting three times a day for meals, with each of the young witches keeping the house parents informed of her whereabouts and her plans at all times. In Snape’s opinion, the whole ordeal was far more trouble than being Head of Slytherin House had ever been. Never before had he been called upon to play such a parental role amongst his charges!

Snape had experienced savage joy at the downfall of Voldemort, in late 1997. Potter, flanked by an army of Order members, had faced down the Dark Lord and his minions on the grounds of the Riddle estate. The battle had raged for three days, with more casualties falling each successive day. The Ministry had proved all but useless; the red tape and endless committee meetings had prevented the Aurors who were not members of the Order and the members of the Magical Law Enforcement Squad from joining the battle until the last day. Admittedly, it was this last wave of warriors that had overborne the army of Death Eaters, giants, Inferi, werewolves, and dementors who fought on the side of the Dark Lord; yet Snape could not but be aware that if they had been with the Order members from the beginning of the battle, the lives of many might have been spared. It was only in his most dismal moments that Snape permitted himself to enumerate the people he knew who had fallen at the Final Battle; it did not bear thinking of.

Ultimately, the upshot of the death toll was the Family Preservation and Marriage Law Act of 1998.

“All witches and wizards who have both attained their majority and have left school are required to marry within six months of the last of these milestones. Those who fail to do so will have their partners chosen for them by the Office of Lifelong Relationships, and will have six weeks to comply with the Law from the date of their notification of the identity of their Ideal Life Partner.”

The deadline for the first wave of marriages was January 1, 1999.

Snape closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, willing away the headache threatening him with an uncomfortable afternoon. Immediately after lunch, he had a meeting with McGonagall and Lupin to review the current standing of the young Order members currently affected by the Law, and to determine what course, if any, needed to be pursued upon their behalf. Glaring at the list on the desk before him, he crossed off Bones, Susan, as well as Johnson, Angelina. Both of these young women had announced betrothals in the week since his meeting with Dumbledore and McGonagall. Reading on, he grimaced over one name on the list.

Tonks, Nymphadora.

Oh, for the love of MERLIN.

Striding to the door, he threw it open, stuck his head into the corridor, and bellowed, “Minerva!”

Professor McGonagall appeared at the top of the stairs. “Severus! How dare you shriek at me!”

Snape closed his eyes and controlled his temper. “I apologize, Minerva. Please join me for a moment.”

McGonagall swept into the room with a sideways glare at her former pupil, and seated herself in the room’s least comfortable chair, raising a haughty eyebrow at him.

Snape closed the door and resumed his place behind the desk. “May I offer you refreshment?” he inquired politely.

There was an infinitesimal lessening of the arctic chill emanating from the Transfiguration professor.

“Nothing for me, thank you,” she replied.

Taking a calming breath, Snape inquired, “Why is Nymphadora Tonks on this list?”

McGonagall surveyed him as if he were not quite bright. “Because she is an unmarried Order member, living in this house, whose age falls in the appropriate range, Severus.”

“I am quite certain that Albus told me an offer had been made for her.”

McGonagall shifted in her chair, redistributing her skirts about her feet. “Well, an *inquiry* was made, really.”

“She was betrothed to Remus Lupin a month ago,” he snapped.

“Remus spoke to Albus about it, Severus, and Albus spoke to Tonks, and she was quite interested...”

Snape rolled his eyes, knowing he would loathe the rest of this story, and twirled his finger impatiently, asking McGonagall to get on with it.

“...but then Remus became violently ill with the wolf pox, and had to be isolated from everyone. We actually had to move him to the hospital wing at Hogwarts, for Poppy to see to him! And then Tonks had an assignment from the Auror office, and she was away for a week — and when she came back, there were a number of social engagements she had accepted...”

Now Snape’s eyes were narrowed as he listened to this recital. “And did she find someone to attend these gatherings with her?” he inquired quietly.

McGonagall was relieved that Snape seemed to understand the situation. “Yes! Well, Remus was sick, and Sirius is his very best friend — as a favour to Remus, you know, Sirius escorted her instead!”

Snape was quiet for so long that McGonagall finally said, “Was that all, Severus? I have some letters to write, before we sit down to lunch.”

Snape looked at her with oddly empty eyes. “Yes, thank you, Minerva. We can discuss the rest of it in our meeting, after lunch.”

McGonagall bustled out of the room, thankful to have been spared a Snape-on-the-subject-of-Sirius-Black diatribe.

Snape sat staring at the door, feeling the headache begin to work on him in earnest. In his mind’s eye, he clearly saw the field of battle, as the Order members struggled to clear the cadre of Death Eaters from the courtyard of Riddle Manor. A contingent of dementors had attacked them from behind, freezing the air with their eerie presence. Lupin and Potter were fighting a fierce defensive action, repelling the dementors as swiftly as possible with their respective Patroni. When the last of the dementors had been driven off, Potter circled to the left of the front line, while Lupin circled to the right, and they joined the small number of Order members who had fought through to the sides, and who were drawing up on the dueling Death Eaters from behind. Lupin joined Bill Weasley and Varen Vector, while Potter advanced with Ted Tonks and Mad-Eye Moody.

Snape was with Voldemort in an upper room, watching the battle from the windows. Voldemort had called for Wormtail to come to him, and was roaring for Lucius Malfoy and Rosier to attend to him. Snape, his back to the Dark Lord, palmed his wand and directed the occasional surreptitious crippling hex at his fellow Death Eaters, doing what he could to follow Dumbledore’s First Imperative: to protect Potter from his own foolhardy courage.

Soon enough, Voldemort summoned Snape to his council, as he and Malfoy laid out fevered battle plans. When Voldemort turned from them to hurl the Cruciatius Curse at a cowering Wormtail, Snape caught Malfoy's eye, and nodded once.

"Severus, deliver this message to Dolohov," Lucius ordered him imperiously, handing him the parchment with Voldemort's new orders scrawled upon it.

"If my Master commands me," he said to Lucius in his most pettish voice.

Voldemort looked up from his occupation with Wormtail. "Please do as you are bid, Severus."

Snape bowed deeply to Voldemort and snatched the parchment from Lucius's hand, swirling out of the room in his Death Eater robes.

He entered onto the courtyard just in time to see Dolohov fall by the hand of Ronald Weasley. The Death Eaters remaining on their feet were in full retreat, Disapparating in large numbers. Under the cover of the portico, Snape hastened to the fallen Order members, casting swift diagnostic spells and administering what quick healing he could without betraying himself to unfriendly eyes.

He spied booted feet extruding from the hedge beyond the drive and he went to investigate. On the ground he found Ted Tonks, ripped from hip to shoulder, apparently

the victim of a Sectumsempra Spell. Snape knew him to be Nymphadora Tonks' father, and only surviving parent; he was a Muggle-born wizard who had married into the Black family and who joined his Auror daughter to fight on the side of the Light. Cautiously, Snape knelt beside Ted Tonks; it was obvious that he was beyond aid. The older wizard gripped Snape's robes in his fist and began to speak.

"Watch out for my girl," he gasped.

Snape regarded him with horror; he had never even spoken to this man before — why would he make such a request?

"I know who you are — Sirius told me —" Ted Tonks stopped to cough, choking on his own blood. "You're the spy..."

Snape cast frantic looks to the perimeter, wondering if he would have to finish the man off himself to keep his secret safe for just a few more hours.

"You have to promise me," Ted Tonks insisted, his fingers displaying preternatural strength as they gripped Snape's robes.

Snape made a vain attempt to twitch his robes from the dying man's clasp, only to have Ted Tonks release his robes and grasp his wrist.

"Promise me," he demanded.

Snape stared down at the man, consternation warring with enforced detachment, and tried to imagine loving someone enough to be thinking of nothing else at the moment of death.

Then, Ted Tonks convulsed and died.
“Severus?”

Snape’s eyes flew open as he was startled out of his morbid reminiscences. Standing in the doorway of the library was his youngest half-sister, Stormy, a winsome child of eight. Her wide blue eyes and corn silk hair were the image of her mother’s. Snape wondered, for the thousandth time, what his father had ever seen in Sophronia Prewett; she was a silly woman, if a beautiful one, and scarcely older than Snape himself. Just look at the absurd names she had chosen for her three children: Skye, Shadow, and Stormy. What had his father been about when the girls were christened as if they were puppies in a litter, rather than Snape children?

The little girl slipped into the room and approached him fearlessly, crawling into his lap and putting her skinny little arms about his neck, completely unaware of Snape’s instinctive distaste.

Snape placed one large hand on the child’s back, allowing her a moment to cling. At last, he spoke to her, in a calm, quiet voice. “Did something upset you, Stormy?”

The nod caused the fine, silky hair to fall into her face; save for the colour, Snape and his youngest half-sibling had identical hair.

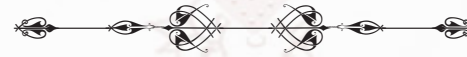
“Tell me,” he invited her.

“That horrid Kreacher was messing about in my things,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I’ll make sure he doesn’t do so again.”

Stormy looked into the ebony eyes that had been frightening children older than she for longer than she had been alive, and pressed a kiss on his angular cheek. “Thank you, Severus,” she piped, climbing back down and taking his hand. “Come to luncheon now; Mummy sent me to find you.”

Snape allowed his sister to tug him out of the room and down the stairs, reflecting that she, in the space of a single day, with no assistance, could ruin the carefully crafted reputation he had spent twenty years cultivating.



After lunch, Snape joined McGonagall and Lupin in the first floor study.

“Severus, we usually meet once a week to review the status of each of the young people,” McGonagall said, by way of beginning.

“It helps us to compare notes, at times, because another point of view might show us some detail we had missed,” Lupin commented, opening a leather folder and pulling out several pieces of parchment.

Snape produced his own list. “It would be useful for me if you will give me a summary of each of the — what *are* we call-

ing them? Not students anymore, obviously, nor children.”

Lupin shrugged. “I keep forgetting, and calling them girls and boys. They are young adults, or young people, according to the Ministry.”

Snape slanted a nasty look at Lupin. “When are we to wish *you* happy, Lupin? Have you chosen your partner? Or will you leave it up to the Office of Last Resort?”

Snape was gratified by the look of pain that flashed across the other wizard’s face. Lupin was ever the diplomat, though; he forced a neutral expression onto his face, and said, “I have been remiss, Severus. Of course, I wish *you* happy with Miss Delacour.”

Snape picked up his list and hunched an unfriendly shoulder at Lupin. “Am I correct in saying that we have six young witches and five young wizards left to dispose of?”

McGonagall picked up her quill. “Dispose of? Severus, please spare us your sense of humour,” she reprimanded. “Among the girls, we still have Katie Bell, Cho Chang, Luna Lovegood, Alicia Spinnet, Nymphadora Tonks, and Ginny Weasley.”

Lupin consulted his list. “The boys remaining are Seamus Finnegan, Neville Longbottom, Draco Malfoy, Harry Potter, and Ronald Weasley.”

McGonagall sighed. “I’m sorry to say that none of the young women seem close to accepting an offer.”

Snape glanced up at Lupin as McGonagall said this. Lupin kept his eyes on his list. Snape’s evil genius prompted him to say, “As we were discussing earlier today, Minerva, I understood that Nymphadora Tonks was on her way to betrothed over a month ago.”

If Lupin was aware of Snape’s look of disgust, he gave no sign of it, jotting notes on the parchment before him. “I offered for her,” he said without looking up. “The details haven’t been decided on.”

Snape opened his mouth to deliver another jibe, but McGonagall caught his eye and he decided to let it go; there would be plenty of time to torment Lupin, if he was to be incarcerated here for two full months — no need to have all his fun on the first day.

McGonagall extracted a printed flyer from the desk drawer and smoothed it out in front of her.

“These are the Ministry functions for the month of July. We attempt to have the young people attend all of the functions, Severus, and at least one of us escorts them to each meeting. They are not required to attend all get-togethers, however, and usually there is at least one who stays behind. We also allow the girls to invite suitors to visit them here, and we attempt to have these visits chaperoned, even if more loosely. I am very thankful to have your stepmother here, as it will make another adult to

chaperone the visits.”

Snape curled his lip at her. “Please do not refer to my father’s widow as my stepmother, Minerva. Call her Sophronia, as I do. She was only two classes ahead of me at Hogwarts, after all.”

“Hufflepuff, wasn’t she?” Lupin said deliberately, glancing up at Snape’s indignant face.

McGonagall observed this byplay with some amusement; she was glad to see that Remus was going to fight back, at least.

“Sophronia will be looking about her for a husband while she’s here,” Snape said, ignoring Lupin’s comment. “Widowhood does not excuse one from complying with the Law. She must marry by the deadline, as well.”

McGonagall sighed, and pushed the papers away from her. “We have only five more months to get them all situated, before it is quite taken out of our hands. These children are going to have to begin to take this entire matter more seriously — don’t they understand that their whole lives are at stake?”

McGonagall reached across the desk and touched Lupin lightly on the hand. “Of course, Remus, you’re right. But do you get the impression that they see it all as some kind of game?”

Lupin gathered his papers in his battle-scarred hands and tapped them on the tabletop, aligning the edges. “They’re young, they’ve lived the last few years of their lives under

enormous pressure, they’ve defeated the Dark Lord, and now they are being rushed into choosing partners, getting married, and beginning families. If they want to treat it like a game, they’ve damn well earned the right to do so.”

Snape watched this near-hormonal outburst from the werewolf, then folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in his chair, saying insolently, “Well, now that you’ve given *your* permission for them to lollygag about, Lupin, I’m sure the rest of us can relax.”

Lupin’s hold on his temper seemed to slip slightly. “Not *all* of us are willing to settle for loveless marriages of convenience, Severus,” he snarled. With a curious lack of grace, Lupin stood, nodded briefly to McGonagall, and left the study, allowing the heavy door to slam as he exited.

“Severus, can you not save your sniping for another time?” McGonagall demanded in exasperation.

Snape glared at her. “You asked me to come here, Minerva. You did not ask me to pretend to be someone else whilst I’m here. This is a serious business, and it seems to me that the children need to be brought to a sense of their duty in this matter.”

“These children have been brought up to believe that they would be able to marry from choice, for love, Severus. Their entire world has been upended. It seems to *me* that it is *our* duty to make this easier for them, rather than

more difficult. Please demonstrate some patience.”

Snape glanced again at the parchment before him. “Why in blazes do you have Miss Weasley and Miss Lovegood in residence? They are still students — they have another year of immunity from this insanity!”

McGonagall removed her glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose. “They are Order members — they have every right to participate the social events, to attain some experience in moving about in society. They have parental permission to be here and to attend parties. It will be of benefit to them both.”

Snape stood abruptly, gathering his papers. “If you have no further pertinent information to impart, I have other things to do.”

McGonagall watched him shrewdly. “Why Fleur Delacour, Severus?” she asked softly.

Snape looked into her face, his expression suddenly forbidding. “Do me the courtesy of minding your own business, Minerva.”

He was at the door, his hand on the doorknob, when she said, “Don’t forget that Hermione Granger will be joining us soon. She isn’t sure which day she’ll arrive, but it will be this week.”

She heard dark muttering, but was only able to discern the words “damned inconvenient” and “make my day”

before Snape slammed out of the room.

I**T WAS NOT** until three days later that Hermione Granger arrived at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. She Apparated into the back garden, where a safe Apparition point had long been established, with Crookshanks and her trunk. Stormy Snape and her sixteen year old sister, Shadow, were in the basement kitchen baking cookies. They heard the ward alarm, which had been set to alert those in the house to the presence of visitors. The Snape girls raced up the steps to the solarium, and threw the door open to see who had arrived.

Hermione was getting her bearings when the solarium door banged open, and two tow-headed girls erupted from the house; simultaneously, she heard her name shouted, and whirled to see Harry and Ron racing across from the house whose back garden shared a common gated fence with the Black house.

She was laughing and hugging her best friends before she caught her breath properly, then she turned to greet the unfamiliar girls in the solarium doorway, who were looking a bit uncomfortable in

the presence of the young wizards.

"Hullo," Hermione said with her friendliest Head-Girl smile. "I'm Hermione Granger."

The older girl spoke up. "We know! Ginny has photographs of you in her room." This young lady cast a look at the boys. "Of all of you, really."

Harry stepped forward and held out his hand. "Hi, I'm Harry. You must be Professor Snape's sisters."

The smaller girl hopped up and down. "Harry Potter! Look, Shadow! It's really him!"

Ron squatted down so that he was on eye-level with the little girl. "And my name's Ron," he told her with a Weasley grin.

Shadow Snape regretfully released Harry's hand and touched her younger sister's shoulder. "This is Stormy — she's eight," she said. She smiled at Hermione, and offered her hand to Ron. "I'm Shadow and I'm sixteen. And we have an older sister; her name is Skye, and she's nineteen."

Ron shook the offered hand, a slight frown marring his freckled face. "Sixteen? I don't remember seeing you at Hogwarts."

Shadow shook her head, causing her yellow hair to fly about her face. "We always had tutors, and a governess," she explained. "Papa said that we couldn't go to Hogwarts because our brother taught there."

"I believe that's enough family history for one day,

Shadow," a stern voice said from the solarium doorway.

Snape stood just inside the room, watching with near-physical distaste while his sisters fawned over the Dun-derheaded Duo. The girls, chastened, filed back into the room. "Is that your mess in the kitchen?" he asked them. When they nodded, he said, "Perhaps you had best return to your project, so that the house-elves won't be complaining to your Mama about extra work."

Having dispatched the girls handily, he turned his attention to the three still standing on the lawn. "I see you found us, Miss Granger," he said, ignoring Potter and Weasley.

Hermione gave him a cheeky smile. "Hullo, Professor! Your sisters are lovely girls!"

Snape gave her an icy stare. "Do you need assistance to bring your luggage inside?" he inquired pointedly.

"We'll get it, Hermione," Harry said, levitating the trunk with his wand. "We were coming over to talk to Ginny anyway," he added, in Snape's direction.

Snape stood aside to allow Potter and Weasley to pass him with the trunk. In the split moment that he took his eyes off Granger, a large black dog came bounding up, barking and wagging its tail. Snape felt himself bristling, as if *he* were the Animagus. Before he could think of anything appropriately nasty to say, the dog had become Sirius Black, and he had Hermione in a rib-cracking embrace.

With a muttered oath, Snape slammed the solarium door and stalked back to the library.

Sirius grinned at the door. "In a snit this morning, is he?"

Hermione linked her arm through his and led him over to a bench set beneath a beech tree. "Is he ever *not* in a snit?" She sat down and waited for the handsome wizard to sit beside her. He had finally begun to lose that starved, stretched look that twelve years in Azkaban Prison had left on him, and was once again recognizable as the man who laughed in the elder Potters' wedding photographs.

Sirius was fully aware of her scrutiny, as he settled himself on the bench. He shook his black hair back and slanted a look down at Hermione's inquisitive face with his laughing grey eyes. "Did I miss a spot shaving?" he asked her teasingly.

"No, Sirius, you look smashing, as I'm sure your mirror has told you," she replied with some asperity. "You really are enjoying yourself these days, aren't you?"

He let loose the laugh he had been containing. "Immensely, love. I've gone from Death Eater Black, convicted murderer and denizen of Azkaban Prison, to War Hero Black, eligible bachelor and prize of the marriage market, almost overnight. I have women chasing me all over town. I don't know when I've had such a good time."

Crookshanks jumped up into Sirius' lap, purring.

Sirius began to scratch the ginger cat's head, watching the slightly disapproving look on Hermione's face. "You really can't object, you know," he reminded her.

Hermione snorted. "You were drunk, Sirius. I make it a habit to never accept marriage proposals from drunken men."

Sirius set Crookshanks on the grass and stood, brushing cat fur from his trousers. "How many times have I asked since then?"

Hermione waved a hand at him. "You know you would never have asked if Harry hadn't put the idea in your head, Sirius."

"I might have done, Hermione." He reached out and touched her hair. "We have to marry someone before the New Year. Wouldn't you prefer to marry someone who loves you?"

Hermione smiled up at him. "We aren't *in* love, Sirius. I would rather not marry someone whom I consider as family, if I can help it."

Sirius shrugged, and looked away from her, directing his attention to the back windows of the house.

"Why in the name of Merlin is Snape glaring at me from my father's library?" he wondered out loud.

Hermione looked up at the window Sirius indicated. "I don't see him."

Sirius shook his head, a crooked grin on his face. "No, he moved right quickly when he saw me looking." He took Hermione's hands and pulled her to her feet. "I have to

get back over to the house; Remus and I are supervising the boys to the Ministry do tonight, and we have some counselling to do beforehand.”

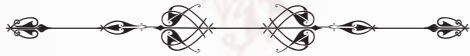
“Sirius,” Hermione said, hesitantly, “what are you *doing* with Tonks?”

“Second cousins can marry,” he said, defensively.

“MARRY?” she said.

“Never mind. I’m not doing anything with Tonks, Hermione. I’ve got to go, now.”

Hermione stood chewing on her lip as she watched Sirius cross the garden and go through the gate to the other house; then she scooped up her cat and headed into the solarium of Grimmauld Place. So many people with so many problems! It was a good thing her parents had taken her suggestion to go to Ibiza for the summer; she was definitely needed here.



Hermione sat in the chair in her bedroom, stroking Crookshanks and watching Winky as she unpacked Hermione’s trunk. After a moment, there was a swift knock at her bedroom door, and a vision of loveliness appeared in the doorway. Hermione smiled broadly.

“Please come in! I don’t have to ask who *you* are; I met your sisters in the garden. You must be Skye! I’m Hermione



Granger.”

The other girl came forward eagerly, a small smile on her lips. “Yes, I’m Skye. It’s good to meet you.”

Skye’s hair was golden blonde, and was French braided into a long plait down her back. Her eyes were the same bright blue as her sisters’. Her skin seemed to have a faint glow, tinted in damask and rose, and her lips were a perfect bow. Hermione couldn’t help thinking that the girl was a piece of perfection.

“Are you sure you’re related to Professor Snape?” she said unguardedly.

Skye laughed. “We aren’t much alike, are we? Everyone says we girls look just like our mum. Severus looks like Papa. But all four of us have the Snape bump.”

Hermione wondered for a moment if she *really* wanted to know. “The Snape bump?”

Skye turned her head, showing her classical profile, and indicated the upper lobe of her ear. Hermione leaned forward politely, to watch as Skye ran a fingertip along the topmost portion of the outer rim of her ear; near the apex, there was indeed a very slight irregularity.

“I would never have noticed that if you hadn’t pointed it out to me,” Hermione commented.

“It is a very small thing, but both of my sisters have the same oddity; it’s the kind of thing children *will* notice, you



know.” Skye slipped down to sit on the rug near Hermione’s feet, her legs curled under her, before continuing with her explanation. “We hardly ever saw our brother when we were growing up; it was all very mysterious. Later, we understood that it was because of his part in the War. But one time, when he came to visit us over the summer hols, we went on a picnic with him. Shadow showed him the bump on her ear, and then Stormy and I showed ours.”

Hermione kept an attentive expression on her face, trying not to let her fertile imagination run away with the vision of her Potions professor on a picnic, buttoned up to the throat in black wool and eating hard-boiled eggs with his fingers.

Skye smiled reminiscently. “It was the oddest thing, because Severus was always so stiff with us, while we just swarmed all over him like kittens. We had photographs of him, but because he seldom visited, he was just so puzzling to us. We made up the silliest stories about him and the adventures we imagined him to be having, living away from us all the time.

“Anyway, when he had looked at the bumps on our ears, he pulled his hair back from his face and showed us the very same bump on his own ear — and, do you know, from that time on, he became much friendlier to us. Almost like a real brother.”

Hermione was distracted by Winky’s announcement that

the unpacking was complete; she thanked the house-elf courteously and told her she could go. After Winky Disappeared, Hermione stood and went to open the door to her wardrobe. “We’re going to a Ministry party tonight, aren’t we?”

Skye nodded. “Yes, we’ll be going after dinner.” She went to stand beside the other girl, considering the clothes hanging before them. “Oh, you have so many Muggle things!” she said enviously.

“Yes, my parents are Muggles, so I never knew I was a witch until I got my Hogwarts letter,” Hermione explained. She eyed Skye carefully. “We’re very much the same size, if you’d like to borrow something to wear tonight.”

Skye’s face lit up. “Could I? That would be brilliant!” She lifted a sky blue mini-dress with a halter neck and held it before her, eagerly looking into the mirror.

Hermione stood back. “That exactly matches your eyes — it’s perfect!” She rummaged about in a drawer and pulled out a silvery shawl. “I always wear this with it; your back will be rather bare, and it can get chilly.”

At the word “bare,” Skye’s face fell. “Severus will *never* let me wear this.”

Hermione snorted. “Stuff! What has he to say about it, pray tell? Isn’t your mum here?”

“Yes, Mum is here, but she always does what Severus wants her to do. He is... difficult to withstand.”

Hermione lifted her chin. “Yes, I know all about his bossy and overbearing ways.” There was a slight narrowing of her eyes, as if she were seeing a distant memory. “However, I am no longer his student, and I do not intend to allow him to act like a despot where I’m concerned — not ever again! And you mustn’t let him compel you to do what you don’t wish to do, Skye. It only encourages him. He isn’t your papa, after all.”

Skye watched this unaccountable girl with mingled doubt and hope. She had yet to see *anyone* win out over her autocratic brother, but perhaps this young witch would do so. Hermione wasn’t really a pretty girl, in the usual sense, but her large brown eyes and expressive mouth gave her a striking appearance, and she was certainly full of resolution. Skye decided that Hermione probably had plenty of boys who liked her — especially if she got to wear *these* clothes!

In a trice, Hermione had helped Skye change into the blue dress and carefully arranged the shawl over her elbows.

“Do I dare?” Skye breathed, staring at her own reflection in the mirror.

Hermione headed for the door. “Let’s go and ask your mum; if she gives her permission, then Severus can have nothing to say about it.”

Skye followed her into the corridor. “Mum’s room is on the next floor up... Oh, I hope she says yes!”

Snape strode out of his room and headed down the stairs to the sitting room. It was the habit of the house for everyone to meet in the sitting room for a drink before dinner was served; Severus hoped there would be fewer dunderheaded wizards present to disturb his enjoyment of his meal tonight than had been his luck earlier this week. McGonagall permitted any and all male callers to receive dinner invitations from the young ladies, with no notice whatsoever. It was true that the house-elves prepared enough food at each meal to feed an army, but the strain of being sociable with former students was almost more than Snape could bear.

He reached the first floor sitting room just as the doorbell chimed, and McGonagall’s voice floated up, greeting the newcomer. Severus went quickly into the sitting room and found himself unexpectedly face to face with his fiancée.

Fleur Delacour, a stunning beauty with a sheet of silvery blond hair falling down her back, advanced on Snape with her hands outstretched and a pleasant smile fixed on her face. He was forced to take her hands, though he released them again as quickly as possible, much to the apparent amusement of the other occupants of the room, who had already served themselves from the drinks tray.

“Is it not wonderful that Mère could spare me to dine with you tonight?” she said to him, taking hold of his upper arm in a proprietary way.

“I count myself most fortunate,” he said, escorting her to a chair away from the chattering youngsters. “May I pour you a drink?” he inquired with faultless courtesy, his hand hovering between the sherry and the claret.

Snape poured the sherry she requested and handed her the goblet, staying on his feet near her chair, engaging her in quiet conversation, all the while keeping a sharp eye on the couples seated on the settees. Katie Bell was sitting beside George Weasley, who was telling a particularly funny story, if one were to judge by the volume of laughter. Cho Chang sat beside Roger Davies, her pretty face animated in enjoyment. Ginny Weasley sat beside her brother, laughing with the others, but Snape could clearly see that her heart wasn't in it. He made a mental note to ask McGonagall what — or whom — Miss Weasley was mooning over. Luna Lovegood and Alicia Spinnet sat together, poring over some sort of catalogue.

Sophronia Snape entered the room with her daughters surrounding her and Hermione Granger bringing up the rear. Sophronia was a woman of only slightly faded beauty; her luxurious golden waves were perhaps helped along a bit by a charm now, but her face and figure retained a large

part of her youthful beauty. Her eyes were a blue so clear that it was almost startling, and each of her three daughters had her eyes, as well as fair hair in various shadings. Granger, following them into the room, looked almost like a gypsy with her dark hair and dark eyes; it was her demeanour, however, that drew all of the eyes in the room to her. George Weasley stood up and greeted her as if she were a long-lost relative. Snape watched with perturbation as she returned Weasley's hug, and then dispensed her greetings to the other occupants of the room like a queen greeting her subjects — or, so it seemed to him.

With careful cordiality, Granger approached him. “Good evening, Professor Snape. Thank you so much for allowing me to come and stay while my parents are away.” Granger then held out a hand to Fleur. “Congratulations on your engagement,” she said, including Snape also in the warm smile she gave to his fiancée.

Snape inclined his head in acknowledgement of Granger's felicitations, bothered by some expression that seemed to lurk at the back of her eyes. Was she laughing at him? For what? Did she *dare*?

Snape became aware of his fiancée's eyes upon him, and quickly looked away from Granger. He spied his eldest sister, Skye, in animated conversation with Davies, apparently much to the annoyance of Miss Chang. Skye was wearing an inde-

cently skimpy dress, like some common trollop. He crossed the room in two strides and spoke to her quietly.

“May I speak to you in the hallway, please?” It was a command, rather than a question.

Skye tilted her chin, in a move eerily familiar to him, and preceded him through the doorway. “What is it, Severus? I was having a nice conversation.”

“Where did you get those clothes? Go upstairs and change at once.” He was glowering at her, and his tone brooked no argument.

“Mum has approved this outfit, Severus. Why don’t you speak to *her* about it?”

At that moment, McGonagall ascended the stairs, followed by Lee Jordan. McGonagall paused in the hallway to introduce Jordan to Skye; as she did so, Snape went back into the sitting room, and once again stationed himself beside his fiancée, resolving to have a discussion with Sophronia at the next possible occasion concerning her lack of control over Skye.

Jordan entered the room, shook hands with the other young men, hugged Granger, and greeted Snape politely, before taking his place on the settee between Lovegood and Spinnet and engaging them in conversation.

Snape was immensely thankful when they were called to the dinner table by a bowing Winky.



The Ministry function that night was an informal dance, followed by a midnight champagne supper. Snape and McGonagall escorted their charges into the Ministry ballroom, which had been magically transformed into a flower-scented garden beneath a clear star-studded sky. At the request of the young people, there was no live band tonight; instead, a committee of the recent Hogwarts graduates had compiled a play list of popular songs, which were even now playing from strategically placed speakers. After seeing each of the girls safely into the building, and carefully patrolling the perimeter of the room for signs of danger, Snape stationed himself near Fleur and the crowd of newly-seventeen-year-old wizards who were currently making fools of themselves to attract her attention.

Leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest, Snape marked the movements of the young women about the room. Miss Bell was dancing with George Weasley, Miss Chang was wrapped about Roger Davies, Miss Spinnet was talking animatedly with Lee Jordan, while Nymphadora Tonks and Ginny Weasley sat together at one of the small round tables drinking punch and watching the others dance. Luna Lovegood was winding her way through the dancers with no apparent destination;

she had that oddball, dreamy look on her face that made Snape think it would take an act of the Wizengamot to make a man marry the girl.

Moving about the room, greeting people and exchanging hugs, was Hermione Granger. It appeared that she knew every male in attendance, regardless of whether or not that person had been a member of the Order of the Phoenix. Scarcely a man was passed by without a hug, or a handshake and a laughing remark. It was true, as Head Girl at Hogwarts, every student had recognized her and known her name; it was also true that her part in the defeat of Voldemort had made her face familiar to anyone who read *THE DAILY PROPHET*. But did that mean that she had to touch every man in the room? The chit was impossible. McGonagall would have to deal with her; Snape was damned if he'd be fussed.

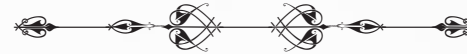
"She is *very* popular," an annoyed voice commented.

Snape looked away from Granger to find Fleur watching him with dangerously narrowed eyes.

"Yes, too popular," he said dismissively. "Shall we dance?"

As the current tune was something with a slow tempo, Snape felt confident in leading Fleur into the dance; she came willingly into his arms, mollified for the moment by this mark of attention from him. When she pressed her cheek to his shoulder, closing her eyes with all the appear-

ance of a young woman dancing with the man she loved, she missed the small detail of her betrothed continuing to follow Granger about the ballroom with his obsidian eyes.

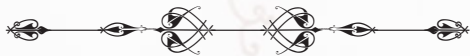


Sirius Black arrived with his charges thirty minutes later. The young men of the Order, all of whom had won distinction on the field of battle, caused no small measure of excitement by their dramatic entrance. Young women around the room seemed to converge from every direction; before long, Black was spotted by a number of women in their thirties, and he too was besieged with requests.

Harry Potter took a step back from the crowd of girls surrounding his enthusiastic mates with a look of faint distaste on his face. He had been aware, since the beginning of his sixth year, that girls would do anything to gain the attention of the Boy-Who-Lived. That type of attraction held no allure for him; he was only interested in a girl who would like him for himself. With his hands in his pockets, his shock of black hair in its usual state of disarray, Harry wandered in the direction of the punch bowl, scanning the crowd for a familiar face, for someone he could talk to. Glancing around to make sure he was unobserved by his godfather or his former professors, he loosened his crimson and gold rep tie. From across

the room, he heard a shout of laughter, and recognized the voice of George Weasley. Turning to look, he spied George and Lee Jordan, surrounded by a number of girls; the prats were waltzing together. A relaxed grin spread across Harry's face and he began to make his way across the room. He was halfway there when he saw something that made him stop in his tracks.

Standing between Katie and Alicia was an angel. Her exquisite face, alight with mirth, was the prettiest he had ever seen. Her hair looked like spun gold, piled high on her head, with tendrils framing her face; her eyes were the exact colour of rain-drenched bluebells. Her figure, in that dress, made his mouth feel suddenly very dry. And in the very next moment, the angel looked up, and her gaze fell upon him. When their eyes met across the dance floor, he knew that she, too, was amazed. Without looking right or left, Harry walked to her with his back straight, and his shoulders squared; he was a man with a mission.



Snape had courteously seated Fleur at a table with Nymphadora Tonks and Ginny Weasley, and gone to fetch a cup of punch for her, when he saw his sister glide into the arms of Harry Potter and out onto the dance floor. Damnation! How had Potter escaped from the group-



ies that had surrounded him when he entered the room? Snape had spoken to Skye about the young men of the Order, and he thought he had made it perfectly plain to her that she was to look elsewhere for a husband; he would not permit his sister to throw herself away on the likes of Harry Potter, or Ronald Weasley, or, Merlin save him, Neville Longbottom.

Making a slight detour past the throng of girls surrounding Finnegan, Longbottom, and Weasley, he tapped Draco Malfoy on the shoulder.

Draco turned to him, a look of utter boredom on his otherwise handsome features; when he saw Snape, the practiced smile on his lips actually touched his eyes.

"Sir! It's good to see you!" Draco then extended a hand. "Congratulations on your engagement — when is the happy day?"

Snape placed a hand on Draco's shoulder, ignoring the offered handshake, and compelled Draco to walk with him. "Don't be asinine, Draco. Come with me; there is someone I want you to meet."

Draco agreeably accompanied Snape to the refreshment table. "Are you settled in at the Black house, sir?"

Snape growled at him, levitating three glasses of punch and leading the way back to the table where Fleur sat with Tonks and Miss Weasley, who were speaking together and



pointedly ignoring her. Snape civilly presented each of the ladies with a glass of punch, before excusing himself. "I just need to make an introduction," he explained.

Keeping Draco by his side, he made a partial circuit of the room, watching Potter and Skye dancing slowly and deep in conversation. He was momentarily distracted by the Granger minx, dancing by in the arms of Sirius Black, who had escaped from the women his own age and was whispering something in Granger's ear that was outrageous enough to make her blush. Grinding his teeth together, he imagined Black hanging upside down from the ceiling of an empty dungeon at Hogwarts.

The vision was so pleasing to him that he almost missed his opportunity. When the song ended, he plotted a course across the floor that intersected neatly with Skye and Potter; before they properly knew what had happened to them, Snape had introduced Skye to Draco, and Draco had obediently whisked her off for a dance.

Potter's eyes tracked Skye jealously. Snape restrained himself from telling Potter he could damn well forget any pretensions he might have about pursuing Snape's sister. Instead, he said, "You might ask Miss Weasley to dance, Potter. She hasn't stirred from that table since we arrived."

Potter led Miss Weasley out onto the dance floor, the two of them chatting with the ease of old friends. Snape watched

them with something akin to approval; he found that he had no objection to Potter marrying into the *Weasley* family.

Unfortunately, while his mind was wandering, Sirius Black delivered Granger to Snape's table, and absconded with Nymphadora Tonks. Snape was only alerted to this circumstance when he saw them dance by, Tonks with both arms shamelessly around Black's waist, while Black whispered undoubtedly indecent things in her ear. Snape thought, sourly, that all he lacked to make this scene complete would be the outraged werewolf, pacing the floor and fighting the urge to urinate on the walls to mark his territory.

"Professor?"

Snape was interrupted in his werewolf reverie by the Granger girl's voice. He turned to face her, seeing Fleur in the background, drinking her punch and keeping a vigilant eye on him.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" His tone conveyed boredom and scarcely veiled contempt.

"Would you dance with me?"

He actually stepped away from her in his apparent aversion. "I beg your pardon; I am pledged to Miss Delacour for this dance."

Fleur immediately stood and moved into his arms, saying, "Of course, darling," and twirling off, unable to prevent herself from throwing a triumphant look at

Hermione as they danced away.

Hermione stood on her own at the edge of the dance floor, succumbing to a peal of laughter, wondering what would be the expression on the Potion master's face if he knew that she had cleared her request with Fleur *before* she asked him to dance.



For the rest of night, Snape alternated between running interference to keep Skye out of Potter's pocket and glowering as Granger danced with every unmarried male under the age of seventy in attendance at the party.

Except for him, of course.

Fleur went home early, pleading a headache.

Snape watched Tonks slip off with Black while Skye stole another dance with Potter and Granger laughed with yet another handsome young wizard. When his own migraine became unbearable, Snape consigned his charges to McGonagall's care, and with a thunderous look upon his pinched face, he Apparated to Grimmauld Place.

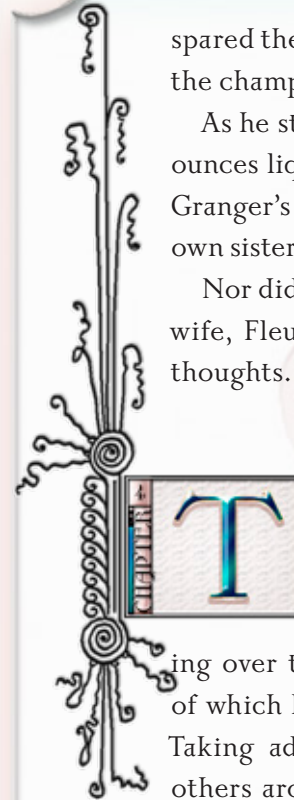
Slamming his way into the house, he entered the library, grabbed the bottle of Firewhisky from the table, and flung himself into a chair. Disdaining the goblets set out for his use, he put the bottle to his lips and felt the liquor burn its way down his throat. At least he would be



spared the spectacle of Granger's behaviour at the champagne supper.

As he steadily drank his way through several ounces liquor, he did not stop to question why Granger's actions overshadowed those of his own sister in his troubled mind.

Nor did he stop to wonder why his affianced wife, Fleur Delacour, never once entered his thoughts.



TWO DAYS LATER, the members of the household who had come down for breakfast were dawdling over their teacups and looking over the newspaper and their mail, both of which had just been delivered by owl post. Taking advantage of the inattention of the others around her, Hermione leaned towards Professor Snape and said, "May I speak with you this morning, sir?"

Snape gave no indication of his deep unease at these words, other than the tic in his cheek; without taking his eyes from the *DAILY PROPHET*, he replied, "There can surely be no need of that."



Hermione took a risk and moved from her seat into the empty one at Snape's left. Snape's body seemed to withdraw further into his chair as he lowered the newspaper and glared at her.

"Please, sir," she said softly. "I don't know with whom else I could possibly discuss this."

"Whatever it is, it would more appropriately be handled by Professor McGonagall," he snapped, rising from the table with ill grace and striding from the room.

Skye looked up from the letter she held, upon which Hermione recognized Harry's handwriting, and said, "Where is Severus off to? Is he upset about something?"

Hermione took the untouched piece of toast from Snape's plate and slathered it with raspberry jam. "Oh, no more so than usual," she said merrily, tossing Skye a roguish look and taking a bite.



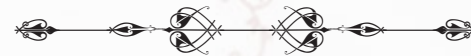
Snape closed the door to his refuge and crossed to the desk he had come to regard as his own, sagging into the chair with uncharacteristic relief. He did not mind his role as protector of this house and its inhabitants; truth be told, he was accustomed to that function, and would be quite put out to reside in a place where another person took that position in his stead. He accepted that



he would watch over his charges, giving any wizard who thought to toy with the young witches of the Order a clear indication that they would have to deal with him. He did not even mind entering into the marriage settlement arrangements when the time came for that; it was a time-honoured custom in the wizarding world, and one he had always expected would fall to him on behalf of his sisters, in the event of their father's death.

He did not, however, agree to be anyone's confidante or confessor. He left the emotional well-being of the young women to McGonagall; except of course, for his sisters, who could need no other counsellor as long as their mama was in residence. There was not the least need for Granger to speak with him privately; not at any time, or for any reason.

With this concrete fact clearly ingrained in his consciousness, Snape flooded the kitchen for a pot of coffee and returned to his newspaper.



Hermione went up to the third floor and entered what had once been the schoolroom at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Within, she found Shadow attempting to transfigure a set of robes, while Stormy happily played with her new pink Pygmy Puff, named Fletcher.

Hermione sat down on the floor and reached out to



stroke Fletcher. Stormy looked around nervously. "Crookshanks isn't with you, is he?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, he's outside chasing gnomes." She glanced over to Shadow. "What are you trying to turn them into?" she inquired curiously, as Shadow muttered another spell that failed to make the least difference in the robes.

Shadow blushed. "I was just trying to alter them a bit," she murmured.

Hermione stood and approached the table. "Alter them how?"

Shadow cast a quick glance at her sister, but Stormy was far too enthralled with Fletcher to notice what the older girls were talking about.

"I wanted to lower the neckline a little... and to make them fit me a little better."

Hermione considered for a moment, then leaned toward Shadow, her back carefully turned to Stormy. "Convince your sister to go show her new pet to your brother and I will transfigure the robes for you. I'll also teach you the spell I use."

Stormy required only a touch of persuasion to show off Fletcher. "Will Severus *want* to meet Fletcher?" she asked anxiously, hesitating in the doorway.

Shadow caught the infinitesimal nod from Hermione and said, "Yes, of course he will!"

Stormy stayed only to beam at her sister before pelting

down the stairs to give her brother a rare treat.

With the youngest Snape absent from the room, Hermione turned back to the middle sister. "Right. Pull them on and we'll make the alterations; it's easier to do if you're wearing them when you change them..."



Hermione approached the library door, pleased to note that she had been right; Stormy had indeed left the door ajar when she entered the room to display her new pet to Snape. Due to the havoc currently being wrought by the pink creature scurrying across the parchments on the professor's desk, Hermione was able to enter the room and take a seat before her presence was discovered.

Snape snatched the squirming Pygmy Puff in one hand and thrust it back at Stormy. "Will you please take Fletcher elsewhere now?" he asked in pained voice.

Tears seemed to tremble in the tiny voice of his adoring tormentor. "Don't you like him, Severus?"

One large, elegantly formed hand reached out to deliver an awkward pat to the corn silk hair on the top of the child's head. "He is undoubtedly a prince among Pygmy Puffs. Perhaps he would enjoy a bath now? He seems to have gotten some ink on his fur." Snape morosely considered the smeared ruin of the last several sentences of the

monograph over which he laboured.

Stormy brightened. "A bath! Yes, I'm sure he'll enjoy a bath. Thank you, Severus!" Bestowing him with a shining smile, Stormy exited the room, the soiled Pygmy Puff held close to her heart.

Snape snatched up his wand and caused the door to close with a snap before turning his attention to the parchment and attempting a spell to remove the smeared ink from the page.

"I believe I told you Professor McGonagall could assist you, Miss Granger?" he inquired in a dangerously soft tone without raising his eyes from his task.

Hermione watched him with clinical interest. "You won't be able to remove the smears, you know," she said.

Snape raised his eyes to glower at her. "I don't know why you're still here. Professor McGonagall can usually be found in the study at this time of day."

Hermione stood and approached the desk, her scholarly instincts awakened by the problem displayed before her. "I believe that if you magically copy the work to another scroll of parchment, you will be able to salvage your last paragraph," she said, leaning over the desk to more closely inspect the damage.

Snape steeled himself not to shrink back from her proximity, though he could not help but notice that the

neckline of her robes seemed rather low for everyday wear — then her scent washed over him in a wave that brought him to his feet with inexplicable anger.

"Miss Granger! I do not desire your assistance! Please leave this room."

Hermione straightened from her position of leaning over the desk and met his incensed ebony eyes with her indignant brown ones. She was aware of him pulling himself up to his full height and narrowing his eyes at her in an intimidating glare — both tactics that had once worked upon her quite well. Raising her chin with determination, she turned her back on him and returned to the chair she had abandoned, seating herself and crossing her legs in the manner of someone settling in for a long chat.

Mindful of the bundle of nerves and anger mere feet away from her, Hermione defused the situation by studying the nails on her left hand. "Perhaps we should agree, Professor, that I am no longer your student?"

Snape controlled himself with an effort before following her example and sitting again. "It is a fortunate thing for you, Miss Granger, that you *are* no longer my student. How unhappy your house would be to start the new term in negative numbers on house points."

Hermione greeted this sally with a dry chuckle, which earned her a malevolent scowl. Ignoring his continuing

ungracious behaviour, she began to speak to him.

“Professor, as I am no longer a student at Hogwarts, I am no longer constrained by the curriculum there.”

She glanced at his face to see how he was taking the new direction of the conversation, only to find him giving her a blank, discouraging stare. She continued doggedly.

“I wish to continue my studies, even though I have left school. The subject that I wish to begin to learn is the Dark Arts. I would like to ask your advice as to what books you would recommend as a beginning, and to know where I might procure them.”

“Don’t be absurd.”

The tone was dismissive. Hermione chanced another look at him, only to find him once again fully occupied with the ruined parchment.

“I’m serious, sir. I wish to begin reading the Dark Arts.”

Snape felt warning bells chiming in his brain from at least three different directions. He was no longer her teacher, so he could not simply command her obedience to his will, no matter how strongly he wished to do so. It was his duty to protect her, to help her to find and marry an appropriate partner — no, he would not think about that — how was he to squelch this preposterous, not to mention illegal, idea?

Inspiration flooded his mind and he made his magnanimous offer. “If you wish to read, I will choose an appropriate book for you from this collection. I am sure I can find

material suitable for a young lady.”

“Oh, I fear that would never do,” Hermione said, shaking her head.

“Indeed? Why not, if I may ask?”

“I might over-excite the book,” said Hermione, dulcetly.

Snape stared at her, momentarily taken aback. Searching his admittedly limited knowledge regarding the working of the female mind — and adapting it to this particular know-it-all — he replied smoothly, “I beg your pardon, Miss Granger. I did not mean to offend you. But you are here to attend parties and balls and soirées; you cannot possibly require additional occupation at this time.”

Hermione smiled sweetly. “I’m not offended, sir. Where does one purchase books about the Dark Arts?”

“You can scarcely be planning to walk into a book shop and inquire after books on the Dark Arts! It is completely inappropriate.” Casting about in his mind for a reason that might check this idiotic plan, he said, “I should not care to see any of my sisters reading the Dark Arts.”

“You must remember to tell them so,” Hermione said affably. “Do they mind when you boss them around? I never had a brother myself, so I can’t know.”

Snape, annoyed at this sudden attack, retorted grimly, “It would have been better for you if you had a brother!”

Hermione shook her head. “I don’t think so. From what

I have seen of my friends' brothers, I am quite happy that my parents never burdened me with any."

Snape ground his teeth. "Thank you! I know how I might take that, I suppose!"

"Well, I imagine you might, for although you have a great many antiquated notions, I don't think you *stupid*, precisely."

Snape looked at the atrocious girl sitting across from him and had a momentary urge to acknowledge a hit from a deserving adversary. Pushing this reckless thought away from him, he said, "I will not quarrel with you, Miss Granger. Let us call a truce, shall we?"

"By all means!" she agreed cordially. "Let us discuss my books. Do I go to Flourish and Blotts to purchase texts on the Dark Arts?"

"Certainly not!"

Hermione sighed in frustration. "Is that something you wouldn't want your sisters to do, or would it really be wrong for me to do it?"

"It would be beyond improper, you abominable girl! It could lay you open to criminal charges. The books are restricted, you should know that!"

At that moment a knock sounded at the door. "Enter!" Snape snarled, thinking this might be the excuse he needed to escape the questioning chit.

Winky curtsied in the doorway. "Winky is begging your

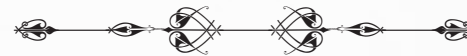


pardon, Master Snape. Mistress McGonagall is sending Winky to tell you that Mistress Fleur and her mother are here to see Master."

Snape stood with alacrity. "I will go up now, Winky. This would be a good time for you to tidy up in here." He tossed a glance at Granger in passing. "I'm sure you can show yourself out, Miss Granger." Then he swept out the door and his footsteps could be heard on the stairway.

"I won't be in your way if I sit here on the settee, will I, Winky?"

Winky assured her that the cleaning could be done around her, and Hermione strolled over the bookcases directly behind the desk, squatting down to view the books on the two lowest shelves. She had noted the dark aura on these shelves when she had been in the room before, and felt sure that the Dark Arts texts would be found there. Selecting a book entitled *MAGICK MOSTE EVILE*, Hermione walked over to the settee at the side of the room. For the first time, she noticed a cupboard against the back wall, shimmering with a number of magical wards. As she passed the cupboard, she felt the pull of the books within, and wondered about it. Then she sat down, opened the book she had chosen, and promptly lost herself between the covers.



Snape saw the door closed on his betrothed and her mother, thankful that his wedding day was two months hence. One of the Delacour women was trying, but two of them were damn near unbearable. Surely, once the wedding preparations had been completed, conversations with the two women would cease to be such a chore. With that cheerful thought to sustain him, he made his way back to the library.

The sight that greeted him when he crossed the threshold held him spellbound in fury. There the Granger girl sat, oblivious to her surroundings, her nose buried in one of the Dark Arts texts he had deliberately shelved away from prying eyes. He had ample opportunity to observe the concentration with which Granger drank the information from the page, as well as to see, from her place in the book, how very quickly she read. These scholarly attributes did not appear to afford him much gratification, as he sent Winky away with a jerk of his head and bore down upon the young woman who was fair promising to become the bane of his existence.

Hermione became aware of Snape's presence when he snatched the text book from her hands with unwarranted violence. He stood over her with a look of tremendous rage on his face, his lips gripped together in a thin, cruel line. Of Winky, there was no sign.

"Where is Winky?" she inquired, apropos of nothing. "I have sent her out of the room," Snape replied.

Hermione looked up at him, her expressive eyes full of amusement. "Good move! I like a man who thinks of everything. You could never have rowed with me really well with the house-elf standing there, overhearing every word you said to me."

"How dared you take my book?" he demanded thunderously.

"It was bad for me to do so, but you must admit you provoked me by speaking to me as if I were a silly chit scarcely able to read a romance novel."

Snape's lips were gripped so tightly closed that there seemed to be no likelihood of his admitting anything at all.

"At least own that I have the intellectual capacity to handle the material in the books," said Hermione.

"I will own no such thing!" Snape spat.

"How stingy of you!" said Hermione.

"I let no one — *no one* — read my books but myself."

"In general, I believe you are quite right. It's amazing how some people have no thought or care for other people's books."

Snape snarled and whirled away from her, to replace the book on its shelf.

"Oh, don't be so out of reason cross, Professor!" she begged. "You know I didn't harm your book. Will you direct me on how to begin acquiring my own library of

books on the subject?"

"I will have nothing whatsoever to do with such a hare-brained scheme!" he said harshly.

Hermione took this with equanimity. "Very well," she said. "Perhaps it would suit you better to find an eligible husband for me. I am very willing, and I understand that you have some talent in that." She could not resist the urge to give him a sly look as she said this.

"Have you *no* delicacy of mind?" Snape demanded.

"Oh, with you, sir, I know I can speak my mind. Please, find me an eligible husband! I am not at all picky, and shall be satisfied with the barest modicum of virtues in my spouse."

"Nothing," Snape said savagely, "would afford me greater satisfaction than to see you married to some man who would know how to control your outrageous behaviour!"

"Oh, well said!" approved Hermione.

He replied, "I find it a marvellous circumstance, Miss Granger, that no one has yet strangled you!"

"I believe that Harry and Ron have wanted to, but not badly enough to actually do it."

"And that's another thing!" Snape bellowed, his normally pallid face suffused with a deep red flush. "I will not have Potter and Weasley dangling after my sisters! Don't think I don't know that you introduced them to one another!"

Hermione allowed this entirely unjust accusation to



pass unchallenged, seeking merely to further enrage him. "You only say that because I took your book without your leave. Never mind; I will make other arrangements so that the need will not arise again."

"I will make *sure* that you never do so again!" he retorted. "Let me tell you, Miss Granger, that I should be better pleased if you would refrain from meddling in the affairs of my family!"

"Now that," said Hermione, "I am very glad to know, because if ever I should desire to please you, I shall know just how to set about it. I daresay I won't, but one likes to be prepared for any event, however unlikely."

Snape glared at her with an expression in his eyes so unpleasant that few of his acquaintance would have stayed to continue the conversation. Hermione, however, was made of sterner stuff than most. She returned his forbidding look with raised eyebrows.

"Are you thinking of being so unwise as to cross swords with me, Miss Granger?" he purred, his silky voice dripping venom. "I shan't pretend to misunderstand you, but I will leave you in no doubt of my own meaning. If you imagine that I will *ever* permit a sister of mine to marry either of your boon companions, you have yet something to learn of me."


"Codswallop," Hermione said in a deliberately provoking manner, crossing the room without looking at him,



and opening the door. “Rant at someone who is impressed by it, Professor Snape. Don’t waste all that energy on me.”

She could not be sure, because she had already exited the room, but it sounded as if the silver coffee pot had been hurled against the door with an imprecation that might have frightened a woman with less resolution.

Hermione did not fit in that category.



THE NEXT MORNING found Snape seeking entrance to the sitting room at the top of the house. Sophronia and McGonagall frequently retired there after breakfast, passing their mornings in easy companionship. His glowering presence in the doorway caused McGonagall to look up at him with an inquiring glance, while Sophronia smiled at him as if his scowl were the nicest surprise of her day.

“Come in, Severus,” she invited him, patting the seat beside her on the sofa.

Snape stalked into the room, ignoring the invitation to seat himself, and stood glaring at the

fireplace, his elbow propped on the mantelpiece.

McGonagall rolled her eyes at Sophronia and stood, shaking out her skirts. “I have letters to attend to in the study. I will see you at luncheon, Sophronia.” Without a word to the pouting Professor by the hearth, she took herself out of the room.

Sophronia, inured to Snape irascibility by nearly twenty years of marriage to this man’s father, picked up her embroidery and continued with her stitches, waiting for him to be ready to speak. Her patience was at last rewarded as he blurted out, “You are going to have to speak to the Granger girl, Sophronia! She is completely out of control.”

Sophronia wisely kept her eyes on her needlework. “I understand she upset you yesterday,” she commented, keeping the channel of communication open.

“She has no notion of how to conduct herself in polite company. I wish her parents would come back so that we might be rid of the responsibility of her.” He moved away from the fireplace, now prowling the small room in a manner that would have set his students on high alert.

“I have found her to be a pleasant girl, Severus. Perhaps you and she simply don’t mix well.” She stole a quick look at him as he stood across from her, glaring at the framed lithograph over an ornamental flower stand. “What did she do to anger you?” she inquired softly, as if the answer were of no import.

She heard the audible grinding of his teeth, followed

by several moments of silence. Once again, she busied herself with her sewing project, waiting him out. At last, he strode to the doorway.

"I have errands in Diagon Alley this morning. Is there anything I can do for you while I'm out?"

Sophronia graced him with another gentle smile. "Not a thing in the world, Severus. I hope you enjoy your outing."

Without another word, he left the room.

Sophronia had scarcely had time to register his absence before the author of Severus' bad mood entered the room.

"Good morning!" Hermione said brightly, seating herself in a chair across from Sophronia.

Sophronia looked up with a droll expression. "I suppose you passed Severus on the stairs?" she inquired.

Hermione nodded. "He looked like a thundercloud, so I didn't speak to him."

Sophronia put her embroidery away from her. "What in the world did you do to put him in such a huff, Hermione?"

Hermione gave her a conspiratorial grin. "I went into the library and took one of the books off the shelf after he expressly forbade me to do so," she said nonchalantly.

"Good heavens!" In spite of herself, Sophronia was impressed. "Was he horrid to you?"

Hermione gave a peal of laughter. "He was high-handed, obnoxious, and insufferable. He called into question my



morals, my up bringing, and the likelihood of me ending my days a spinster if I'm not murdered out of hand."

Sophronia could not prevent the tiny smile on her lips. "You mustn't take him *too* seriously, my dear. He's not such a very bad person, he's just not accustomed to living in such close quarters with people — well, not with people whom he can't force into obedience," she added, almost to herself. Then she reached out and placed a kind hand on Hermione's arm. "He wouldn't be so cross if Fleur didn't annoy him so constantly," she confided.

Hermione raised her eyebrows in carefully schooled astonishment. "I would have thought he would be more than a match for Fleur Delacour."

Sophronia shook her head. "He applies himself to being pleasant to the Delacours," she said. "I have tried so *hard* to like that girl and I simply cannot make myself do it."

"Like that tiresome girl? Who *could* like her?"

"That's the question, isn't it?" Sophronia said. "I *think* she wants to be a proper wife to Severus — and she has certainly told me that she wants to 'help' me with the girls — but I don't *want* her help! She does and says everything that is proper. And when I think that she'll be coming to live with us at the Estuary..."

"Good grief, ma'am! They're going to live on the Snape estate? You're not serious!"



Sophronia nodded miserably. "They'll have their own apartments, of course, and will spend the school year at Hogwarts, but..." She broke off and sighed.

Hermione fell into a mood of abstraction and the subject was abandoned; Sophronia picked her sewing up and began to set stitches, while Hermione stared off into space, her mind whirling.



On his way to Diagon Alley, Snape made a detour into the best part of town, where he stopped off to pay a morning call on his betrothed. She welcomed him happily into her family's well-appointed house and settled him on a sofa in the elegant parlour on the first floor before joining him, being careful not to sit closely enough to make him uncomfortable. Fleur was a shrewd young woman; she realized that her fiancé did not relish casual physical contact, and she could appreciate his feelings on the subject. It was only in a crowd where she felt the need to establish her territory that she would disregard his preferences.

She invited him to tell her how he had been getting along, to which Snape replied with polite social talk. He really did not know why he sought her out; it seemed to him as if his life were so littered with women, young, old, and every description in between, that he might at least be able



to spend some of his time with the woman who should logically be his chief encourager, as well as his prime source of comfort. He understood that marriage was supposed to work that way; it puzzled him that he felt no urge to confide in the beautiful creature who was to become his wife.

In the way of a wise woman, Fleur gently coaxed him until he unburdened himself of his most pressing wrongs. Somehow, in the telling of his confrontation with Miss Granger the day before, it seemed to him that what had happened was perhaps not so bad, after all. From being a wild young woman with no redeeming qualities, Hermione began to figure in his conversation as an unconventional, though intelligent girl, in a world peopled with dunderheads at every turn.

"Present company excepted, of course," he assured Fleur with the ghost of a smile.

Fleur was not at all happy with this turn of events. It was bad enough that so much of her fiancé's attention was taken up by his duties as chaperone and protector; it was completely unacceptable for him to be speaking of another girl as intelligent, when she knew — much better than Snape realized it himself — that intelligence was the nectar which drew him to a woman. To redirect his thoughts to a more fruitful area, she said, "It was really outrageous of her to invade your room and to take your



things. It was disrespectful to you!"

Snape replied, "Very true, but I suppose it was in some sort my fault; I provoked her anger and challenged her acumen — always a fatal error with Miss Know-It-All. There's no harm done; she's certainly steady enough not to be seduced by the Dark Arts — and if she can whip through the material at that speed, her intellect is greater than I had suspected. All the same, as long as she remains at Grimmauld Place and under my direction, she will not be purchasing or studying books upon that subject."

With a cagey glance at his face, Fleur said, "Your patience with her does you great credit, darling."

He threw her a sardonic look. "I was *not* patient. If anything, my response was unrestrained in the extreme."

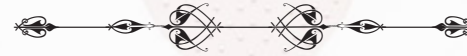
"I do not think it unreasonable for you to have been angry with her for taking your book without asking your leave. Why, I would never ask to read one of those dangerous books, and I am *much* closer to you than *she* is."

For just a moment, a flash of some kind of understanding seemed to cross Snape's features. He stood, preparatory to taking his leave, and said, "I am certain that you have much more reasonable interests; you certainly have no business mucking about with the Dark Arts."

If Fleur had not been mindful of the disastrous results of her losing her temper with Bill Weasley — and those

who followed him — she might have had something to say in reply to this tactless remark. She was not an unintelligent woman! Had she not been selected as the champion for her school in the Triwizard Tournament? Had she not first attracted this elusive man with a display of cleverness that drew his attention to her?

As it was, she was obliged to bite her tongue as he escaped from the house with a mere kiss to her hand, his mind already obviously ranging ahead to his next stop at Flourish and Blotts, in Diagon Alley.



The next day, Snape declined to join the household at breakfast, preferring to spend the morning in the library with a large pot of extra-strong coffee and an esoteric volume dealing with the customs pertaining to marriage amongst wizards in the nineteenth century. He was strongly tempted to soundproof the room, so that the interminable ringing of the doorbell would not continuously intrude upon his consciousness; he forbore to do so, however, reflecting that he would be in a poor position to safeguard anyone if he could hear nothing that transpired in the house.

When lunchtime arrived, he felt that he had managed to compose himself with a few hours of quiet reflection in the library. With the expectation of being able to interact

with the other inhabitants of the house with civility, if not actual affability, he took himself to the dining room.

The sight of Potter and Ronald Weasley seated across the table from one another, with his two eldest sisters by their sides, did not promise an auspicious beginning to lunch. The four of them were in animated conversation, ably helped along by Granger, who was sitting beside a tongue-tied Neville Longbottom. Draco Malfoy sat alone near one end of the long table, ill-humour apparent on his face. He was the first to spot Snape in the doorway; he nodded politely to his father's friend before turning his bored gaze to contemplation of the still life painting hanging over the sideboard. Snape stared very hard at Draco for a moment before nodding shortly at the greetings that peppered him upon his entrance. The Gryffindor contingent was certainly in good spirits today.

Seamus Finnegan came into the room with Luna Lovegood, who looked startled to see the only open seats at the table were near young Malfoy. In a show of gallantry, Seamus took the seat to Draco's left, while Luna was able to seat herself on Finnegan's other side; undoubtedly, the air-headed Ravenclaw had run afoul of Draco's unpleasant tongue at some time in her life.

Snape allowed himself half a sneer as he surveyed the table, before inquiring, "I take it the kitchen at Phoenix

House burned down in the night?"

McGonagall came into the room and swept down the table to take her place at the end. "No, Severus, the young men were invited to lunch with us before we go together to the concert this afternoon. Sirius and Remus *also* asked to be excused from this concert."

Snape preserved his silence at this revelation, giving silent thanks that Minerva was not requiring him to attend the afternoon's musical entertainment; her co-chaperone for the event would be Sophronia, who sat on Snape's right, speaking quietly with Stormy.

Tonks, who was sitting between Katie and Neville, grinned at Snape saucily. "Oi, Severus! Come to the Conservatory with us! I'm sure the music will be right up your alley." Tonks looked wistfully down at her Weird Sisters T-shirt and sighed.

At that moment, Ginevra Weasley came precipitately into the room, murmuring an apology. She looked the table over and saw the only empty chair was between McGonagall and Draco. Young Malfoy glanced up belatedly, seeking the reason for the lull in the conversation. When he perceived Miss Weasley's dilemma, he stood, like the gentleman he had been raised, and held the empty chair, politely waiting for her to seat herself.

Ginny was aware of the eyes on her; she had no desire to sit beside Draco, but she also had no desire to make herself

ridiculous. With a flush staining her cheeks, she took the seat Malfoy offered, then placed her napkin in her lap and addressed an unexceptional remark to her brother. Draco slipped back into his own seat, offering the dish of steak and kidney pie to Ginny before serving his own plate.

Snape was relieved to see Draco behave with such a degree of finesse in the awkward situation; not for the first time, he wondered what had possessed Draco to take up residence with the other young men of the Order of the Phoenix in the abode which the young people had taken to calling Phoenix House. Draco could have remained with his father at Malfoy Manor and Apparated to town for the various entertainments offered, but he had resolutely insisted on staying with the young men who had fought by his side at the end of the war. Snape was aware that Draco had spent less time at the Manor since the tragic death of his mother, but Draco's penchant for the company of the young men of Gryffindor, comrades-in-arms or not, was puzzling to a man who had held himself aloof from all personal attachments for his entire life.

For some reason, Snape's gaze travelled to Potter, who had been so deeply immersed in conversation with Skye when Snape entered the room; now, Potter was glaring at Malfoy in a most satisfying way. Filing away that little titbit of information, Snape began to consume the food on his plate.

As they sat over their coffee and pudding, Stormy turned to Snape with limpid blue eyes. "Severus, may I go to the concert?"

Snape looked up from his coffee cup, frowning. "Certainly not. You're not old enough."

A look quite in keeping with her name came over Stormy's face. "But Shadow gets to go!"

A dangerously quirked eyebrow alerted the Snape women that trouble was brewing.

"Of course Shadow is not going," Snape said, looking straight into Shadow's stricken face. "*She* is not old enough, either." Snape willed himself not to notice the displeasure clearly displayed by Ronald Weasley at this pronouncement.

Sophonra stepped quickly into the breach. "I see no harm in Stormy attending the concert, Severus. I will see to her." She then turned parental attention to her youngest child. "If you are finished with your pudding, Stormy, you may go to your room, rather than sit here and tease your brother."

Perceiving that the victory of going to the concert outweighed the defeat of having to leave the boring grown-ups to their after-meal conversation, Stormy obediently skipped out of the room.

Hermione accidentally overheard the low-voiced conver-

sation between Professor Snape and his step-mother after they all left the table. She went upstairs to reapply her lipstick and to touch up her hair before leaving for the concert, and heard the two of them conversing on the next landing.

“Why is Shadow attending this function?” Snape demanded.

“She is the same age as Ginny Weasley and Luna Lovegood, Severus. She, too, will be seventeen before we know it. I see no harm in having her attend a few social events.”

“She will be a full year behind Miss Weasley and Miss Lovegood when she begins school, Sophronia. Both of those young ladies will turn seventeen before the beginning of the next school term. If their parents wish for them to make their come-out and begin the tedious task of seeking out husbands, that is no bread and butter of mine. I see no point, however, in filling Shadow’s head full of matrimony at this point in her life. It is too soon!”

“I fail to see how attending a concert in company with her mother and her sisters will fill her head full of anything but music, Severus. Excuse me, please; the girls will be waiting for me.”

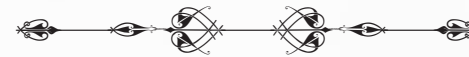
Hermione hurriedly stepped back into her room and waited until she heard the footsteps pass her door before descending the stairs and joining the others.



The young people of the Order of the Phoenix, accompanied by the Snape sisters and their chaperones, strolled into the Conservatory concert hall as a group. Almost immediately they began to scatter, to speak to friends and to find seats.

Hermione watched with interest as her companions paired up. She took note of Shadow, who was looking up at Ron with eager interest as he told her some fanciful story about a Quidditch game in which he figured as a conquering hero, then she let her gaze drift over to Harry and Skye, both of whom seemed to float a bit over the ground that the others trod upon with their feet. There was a cautious Draco, luring Ginny into conversation as if he were attempting to charm a bird out of the trees, while Seamus chatted to Luna. Bringing her attention back to Neville, who continued to cling to her in some social situations as if he were still in Potions class, Hermione linked her arm through his and headed for a group of Hufflepuffs from their year. “Look, Neville! I see Susan *and* Hannah. Let’s go talk to them.”

With her brain buzzing with some new possibilities, Hermione steered Neville towards his destiny for the afternoon.



Harry and Skye had managed to find seats together before the concert began, and sat side by side, trying to act as if they were absorbed in listening to the music, when they



were each actually absorbed in the nearness of the other. With her mama's watchful eye upon her, Skye dared not steal looks at Harry, though she could feel him looking at her.

Sophonra was not concerned with Skye's behaviour; in the middle of this group of people, she scarcely saw what trouble her eldest child could fall into. She was more concerned with the look of hero-worship on Shadow's face as she stole looks at the tall redhead by her side. Skye had been about in society for over a year now, and though she had attended far fewer parties before the Law was passed, she was not unfamiliar with the admiration of young wizards. Shadow, on the other hand, was experiencing the heady feeling of appreciation for the first time in her life; she would bear careful watching.

Fleur Delacour, seated next to her brother across the aisle and two rows back from Harry Potter and Severus' eldest sister, had plenty of time to observe the air of tension between them. With the intimate knowledge allowed a fiancée — things that a mere friend would not be permitted to know — she was well aware of how Severus would feel about a connexion between Skye and Harry Potter. She had not been unaware of her betrothed's efforts to distract the two from one another that night at the dance. She clearly saw her duty, and understood how, with her brother's assistance, she could be of service to her fiancé.

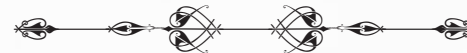
When the musicians withdrew for the interval, Harry stood and offered to escort Skye to the refreshment tables. Skye was in the act of smiling fully into Harry's enchanted eyes when Fleur stepped between them.

"Harry!" Fleur exclaimed, reaching up to place a kiss on his face. "How marvellous to see you again!"

Harry stuttered out a greeting to Fleur as she took her brother by the arm and pulled him into the conversation. "Harry, I do not believe you have met my brother, Val."

Harry reached out to shake the hand of the handsome Frenchman, who closely resembled his sister. Val Delacour shook hands with Harry and then bowed over Skye's hand. Skye seemed to snatch her hand back quickly, which caused Harry to cast a sidelong look at Val; he was startled to see something of a leer marring the other wizard's face.

Fleur tucked her hand in Harry's elbow. "Let us go to the refreshment table! I have hardly seen you since you have been in town, Harry. You must come to see Gabrielle one day; she speaks of you often." As she propelled Harry in the direction of the refreshments, she threw a smile over her shoulder. "Val, please bring Skye."



Hermione stood near the wine bar in the concert hall foyer, chatting with Roger Davies and Michael Corner.

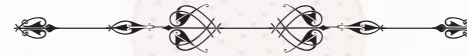
Roger was missing Cho, who was spending the day at home with her mother. Hermione thought, privately, that Roger and Cho would have made a match of it without the urging of the Ministry and the stupid Law, but, like many other couples of their generation, the enforced choice-making was infusing their interactions with self-consciousness.

She was momentarily distracted from the thought of who might be the perfect partner for Michael when she saw Fleur hanging onto Harry and talking his ear off, while Skye was looking decidedly uncomfortable in the company of a man who appeared to be fondling her arm. Before Hermione could go investigate, Professor McGonagall appeared, rounding up her charges and herding them back into the concert hall.

Skye walked away from her soon-to-be sister-in-law and the disgusting Val, her cheeks flushed with mortification. She had no doubt that Fleur was acting on behalf of Severus, which made her quite angry as well as slightly embarrassed. Without demur, she accepted the place indicated for her by Professor McGonagall, and spent the remainder of the concert seated between Draco Malfoy and Luna Lovegood. Resolutely, she did not let her eyes wander to where Harry was seated, beside Ginny Weasley.

Shadow Snape passed the second half of the concert chafing under the restraint of her own place, seated

between Mama and Stormy. Jealously, her eyes watched Ronald Weasley, seated between his sister and Alicia Spinnet. Sophronia caught Shadow's eyes and reprimanded her without a word, directing her attention to the musicians. With a sigh of disgust, Shadow slumped in her seat and stared mutely at the stage, ignoring both her mother and her sister in a rather unconvincing display of her supposed maturity.



As the musicians left the stage accompanied by polite applause, the spectators stood and moved once again toward the foyer for the reception to honour the Conservatory graduates — as well as serve as yet another occasion for the young witches and wizards to mingle.

Hermione worked her way through the crowd, looking for Tonks. She couldn't remember having seen Tonks sitting anywhere near her through the concert and she didn't remember seeing Tonks during the interval. She was feeling a bit concerned, until she saw Tonks seated with a group of like-minded individuals, who had plainly avoided the concert in favour of lurking in the cloakroom and sipping from glasses of wine. She surmised that Tonks was undoubtedly in fine spirits by now — there had been well over two hours for her to be sitting there drinking wine, after all.

Before Hermione reached her goal, she was waylaid by Fleur. "Hermione!" Fleur said, halting Hermione's progress and somehow blocking her path. "It is so good to see you! You have not yet met my brother, Val, have you?"

Hermione surveyed the arm-fondler with polite civility. "How do you do?" she said, neglecting to offer her hand.

"Was the concert not grand?" Fleur said, determinedly holding the book-thieving Granger in conversation.

"I know who you are," Val said, edging closer to Hermione. "I heard all about your part in the war."

Hermione grew tired of this boring exchange with people whom she disliked and deftly sidestepped the encroaching Frenchman. "You mustn't believe everything you hear," she said, giving Val an incredulous look before walking away from them. Finally, she reached Tonks' hiding place in the cloakroom.

Tonks greeted her as if they had not seen one another in a month, garrulously introducing Hermione to her companions, four young wizards whose names Tonks could not recall. Hermione nodded to the young men as she took Tonks by the elbow and headed for the doorway out onto the terrace.

"You need some fresh air," she told Tonks as they slipped through the sheer curtains out into the late afternoon sunshine.

Tonks made a face. "I hate classical music," she mut-

tered, having the grace to look slightly embarrassed.

"You could have stayed home," Hermione reminded her.

"And listened to Severus' everlasting reproaches? Thank you, but no," Tonks said with an indignant snort.

"Is Professor Snape pressuring you?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Not pressuring—I'm sure he would think he is encouraging me. Oh, and telling me not to marry Sirius Black." Tonks sighed. "All of these boys bore me senseless, Hermione. And most of the blokes my age are already married. I'm just a round peg trying to fit into a square hole again."

"Oh, Tonks," Hermione said, her ready sympathy leaping to the fore. "There's someone for you. Someone really special." With a deep breath, she took the plunge. "What about Remus?"

"No." Tonks hunched a shoulder and turned away from Hermione. "He doesn't want me."

"Tonks!" Hermione said in exasperation. "He offered for you."

"He never made the least push to take me back from Sirius when he returned from the hospital, Hermione. Not so much as a word."

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but Tonks was walking away from her, back into the reception. "Come on, let's get something to eat. I'm starving."

Tonks led Hermione to a buffet table spread with hors d'oeuvres and picked up a plate. Hermione noticed Harry, sit-

ting miserably next to Fleur, while Val hovered over Skye; she also saw Ron and Shadow sitting together unobtrusively at a small table, the red head bent close to the flaxen one, as they tried to avoid Sophronia and McGonagall.

“Now *that’s* what I’m talking about,” Tonks murmured, looking over Hermione’s shoulder with rapt appreciation.

Before Hermione could question her, hands came from behind her to cover her eyes. “Guess who?” the deeply accented voice inquired.

Whirling in his arms, Hermione shrieked, “Viktor!” as she delightedly embraced him before the interested eyes of all English wizarding society.

Viktor was the only one who heard her murmur, “You’re *just* the man I need.”

SNAPE APPARATED to the safe spot behind the Leaky Cauldron and strode up the street, his brow furrowed in his customary scowl. He came upon the granite steps of the dignified house with the green door and trod up to ply the heavy brass knocker.

The door was opened by a house-elf who greeted him with a deep bow. “Good morning, Professor Snape,” the elf said, taking Snape’s cloak. “Welcome to the Cave. Master Malfoy is asking for sir this morning.”

Snape looked an inquiry. “Master Malfoy is being in the green parlour, Professor, sir.”

With a curt nod of thanks, Snape climbed the carpeted stairs to the first floor and entered the parlour to his left. The room was typical of those to be found in gentlemen’s clubs all over London; it was paneled in mahogany and the carpets on the floor were venerable old Axminsters. The wing-back chairs and sofas were upholstered in well-kept leather in shades of green. On the highly polished end tables could be found copies of the DAILY PROPHECY, as well as wizarding periodicals; on the two writing desks in opposite corners of the room one could find new quills, the best ink, and hot pressed paper that bore the discreet club heading:

THE CRYSTAL CAVE

NUMBER ELEVEN, DIAGON ALLEY

LONDON

Seated before the bay window was Lucius Malfoy, a magazine spread negligently across his crossed legs and a bone china teacup at his lips. He was the only occupant of the room. He wore beautifully tailored black robes; his long white-blond hair was gathered in a queue at the nape

of his neck, confined by a plain black band.

“Severus, I heard you were in town. Please, join me for a cup of tea.” One languid hand indicated the chair opposite his in the window embrasure. Lucius watched in some concern as his old friend collapsed with an unwonted lack of grace into the chair. “Perhaps you need something a bit more bracing this morning. Let me ring for some — brandy? Scotch?”

Snape raised a humorous eyebrow. “Even I have not sunk so low as to be drinking spirits for breakfast, Lucius.” He gladly accepted the dark tea Lucius passed to him. “Have you seen Draco since you’ve been in town?”

Lucius laughed. “Only when we have met at social functions. Draco is taking the business of finding a wife quite seriously.” With a measuring look, Lucius added, “My son has cultivated an unaccountable taste for the company of... his comrades. He has also developed a bit of an aversion for what he terms my ‘old-fashioned ideas.’”

In a mild tone, Snape replied, “He has no interest in Pansy Parkinson, Lucius. He seems to be confining his attentions to the young women who served with him in the Order.”

“Remind me, Severus...”

Snape rattled off the names. “Katie Bell, Cho Chang, Luna Lovegood, Alicia Spinnet, Nymphadora Tonks, and Ginny Weasley. Oh, and Hermione Granger — I suppose you have not seen her yet.”

“Yes, Miss Granger — she has become quite a popular young lady,” Lucius said blandly. “I saw her at the Gala night, Severus, which you would know if you had bothered to attend.”

Snape rolled his eyes. “I detest inane social gatherings.”

“Well, you have already done your duty and entered into a marriage contract. I, on the other hand, still have my work cut out for me.”

Snape sneered. “Well, do me a favour and marry Hermione Granger. I would be most obliged to you.”

Lucius laughed. “Almost anything else for your sake, dear boy, but not marrying that child. I believe that she secretly despises me, still, even if she is much too well-behaved to demonstrate it to the world.”

Snape snorted. “I was joking, Lucius. If you wanted to marry her, I would do everything in my power to dissuade you from it. She is impossible. The only good thing I know about her is that her mind is as sharp as a razor.” He looked at his friend with an expression of slightly amused annoyance. “She had the bloody impertinence to steal a book off my shelves when my back was turned.”

Lucius looked about the room to make sure they were still alone.

“Not your Dark Arts library?”

“The same. And she read through the thing very quickly. She was trying to force me into helping her set up her own

library. I won't do it, of course." A contemplative look crossed his face. "In the right circumstances, however, I would not mind directing her reading on the subject — just as the tutors do in the Muggle universities."

"Don't look now, Severus, but I think you may be about to have that opportunity."

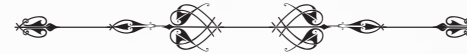
Snape jerked his head around so quickly that he strained his neck. Emerging from Borgin and Burkes, through a side door which opened onto Diagon Alley, was Hermione Granger, in the flesh, accompanied by that blasted Bulgarian Quidditch player — Blum? Crumb?

Lucius found himself looking at the empty chair where Snape had been seated seconds before; he then heard Snape cursing all the way down to the door. The house-elf was still standing in the open doorway of the club with Snape's cloak in his hands when Lucius strolled down the stairs. Taking Snape's cloak from the agitated elf, Lucius retrieved his own cloak and cane and followed his friend into the street.

Hermione, seeing Snape rushing out of the men's club, encouraged Viktor to go keep their appointment to meet Tonks at Gladrags, assuring him that she would find her own way home.

"Hello, Professor," she said amiably, walking up to Snape with a smile. She turned the smile on Lucius when he joined them on the pavement. "Hello, Mr. Malfoy."

Pulling the heavy tome from its bag, she displayed the title, *PRAVUS VENEFICUS*. "What do you think? I believe I got a real bargain — only fifty Galleons!"



Snape snatched the book from her hands and thrust it violently into its bag. "Do you *want* to be seen with contraband? Where did you get that book?" he demanded in a voice shaking with fury.

Clearly diverted, Lucius said, "That's rather obvious, don't you think, Severus?" He removed the much-abused shopping bag from Snape's clutching fingers and handed it to Hermione with a slight bow. "The real question here is, how did you know where to go? Or get them to speak with you, once you got there?"

"Viktor knew where to go. He went to school at Durmstrang, you know," she said, turning guileless brown eyes up to Snape's face.

Lucius was intrigued in spite of himself when Snape turned on his heel and strode away without another word.

"Miss Granger," he said smoothly, "please let me buy you a cup of tea — or perhaps an ice cream? Fortescue's is very near at hand."

Hermione agreed and took the proffered arm as they made their way desultorily down to Fortescue's Ice Cream

Parlour, taking time to window shop as they went. Hermione had been most doubtful of Lucius Malfoy's change of allegiance in the War. It had seemed bad enough at the time to have to accept Draco into their ranks as an Order member; it passed the bounds of the believable the night that she, Harry, and Ron had walked into the kitchen at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, only to find a blindfolded Lucius Malfoy present for his first Order meeting.

It was after the pointless death of his wife, Narcissa, that Lucius' eyes were finally opened to the futility of the path he had begun so many years before, when he was young and encouraged by his own father to believe that pureblood families were the landed aristocracy of the wizarding world. Abraxis Malfoy had welcomed Tom Riddle at Malfoy Manor and had given the self-proclaimed Lord Voldemort financial support in return for the Dark Lord's promise that Lucius would have a prominent role in his organization.

Even after his father's death, Lucius had continued on in Voldemort's service. As the years went by and as he began to think for himself, slowly shedding his father's beliefs, he had come to see the error of his choices. He had not believed there would ever be a way for him to leave the Dark Lord's service and still protect his wife and son.

Then had come the event which would change Lucius'



life irrevocably. Voldemort had heard of a magical artefact that was owned by an old witch who lived in Dieppe. The item was a jewel-encrusted dagger, reputed to have been the favoured side-arm of Salazar Slytherin. The Dark Lord immediately summoned a party of his Death Eaters to him, so that he could instruct them on their mission: to go to France and to return with the dagger. He cared not how the deed was accomplished, providing they put the heirloom into his scaly hands.

Lucius was placed in charge of the project and he was given the so-called assistance of three new recruits whose names no one had yet bothered to learn. They had Apparated to Dieppe and begun the process of locating the old witch and learning how they might best approach her to obtain possession of old Salazar's fancy knife.

It was while he was away that Narcissa had received her own summons from the Dark Lord. She had pledged her loyalty to Voldemort when she became Lucius' wife, as a matter of form. Her own family were purebloods who thought that Voldemort had the right idea about how the world should be run; it was perfectly natural for her to join her husband in the Dark Lord's service. Her part had not been a very active one. She had, when required to do so, donned the robe and the mask of a Death Eater, but as a wife and mother, she was excused from many duties,



regardless of the fact that she had house-elves to cook, clean, and look after her only child.

Lucius was the only one who knew — or so he had foolishly believed, at the time — that Narcissa's agitation as Draco drew closer and closer to adulthood was due to her reluctance to see her son attest his loyalty by taking the Dark Mark. In retrospect, Lucius had come to believe that Narcissa's reticence had been the catalyst that marked her as an unnecessary risk to Lord Voldemort.

Lucius' sources for information on the actual sequence of events that night were varied and the reports were sketchy. His own house-elves informed him that their mistress had been asleep when her sister, Bellatrix, had appeared in Malfoy Manor and hastened to waken her. The enemy had information on Voldemort's whereabouts and they were on the move; a new safe house had to be immediately prepared for the Dark Lord's use. No, house-elves could *not* do the work; Narcissa herself was summoned to go to the location and make ready for the coming of Lord Voldemort. Mistress had complained about the inconvenience, the senior house-elf reported, but she had dressed and left the house to do her sister's bidding.

Bellatrix had been the one who showed up in Lucius' room at the inn in France. She had been utterly distraught as she fell into his arms and told him that Narcissa was dead.

The Dark Lord had been in danger and he had to be moved. He was convinced there was a spy in their midst, and had insisted on having three different places prepared to receive him, to confuse Dumbledore and the Order. The house to which Narcissa had been assigned had mysteriously burned to the ground with her inside of it. Incidentally, it had not been the house which Voldemort had chosen as his new hideout. No, the house where Narcissa had died was merely a decoy to distract any possible spies from the real hideaway. No one knew how the house had caught fire or why Narcissa had not simply Apparated out of it.

Lucius had sat that night for hours on end with the jewelled dagger of Salazar Slytherin in his hands. He had finally just bought the damn thing from the old witch, who had cackled as she closed the door on him, quite pleased both with her bargaining skills and with the large bag of gold Lucius had given her in exchange for the artefact. As he fingered the hilt of the knife, struggling to push from his mind the image of his beautiful Narcissa burning to death in a fire, he determined he would go to his master for justice. Vengeance raged in his heart as he waited for morning.

When Lucius had knelt at the Dark Lord's feet and wordlessly offered the dagger, Voldemort had carelessly handed it off to Peter Pettigrew. No, it was obviously a fake; Voldemort could detect no magic in the dagger.

No, it would not be necessary to investigate the cause of Narcissa's death; it was a fluke, obviously, however tragic. Lucius was to attend to Narcissa's funeral so that he could return to Voldemort's side, where he was needed. Oh, and was not Lucius' son soon to be a man? Lucius should bring the boy to see Voldemort after the funeral; it was time for the young man to begin to know his place in the world.

When Voldemort had said this, Lucius looked up into the horrible, flat, snake-like face, with the terrible red eyes, and saw the answer to his unasked questions. Narcissa was dead because she had dared to *think* of flouting Voldemort's authority. In a flash, Lucius saw Narcissa, Stunned, sprawled across the dirty floor of an abandoned cottage; then, he saw the indistinct figure of a closely hooded wizard throwing the balls of fire repeatedly into the open windows of Narcissa's funeral pyre. Just as suddenly, the vision was gone from his mind, only to be replaced immediately again by the burning cottage — but this time Draco was the one burning in the flames, helpless against the will of the monster Lucius had served all his adult life. With a wrenching inward shudder, Lucius slammed his Occlumency shields against the invasion of the Dark Lord and averted his carefully blank face.

"Exactly so," Voldemort had intoned with satisfaction.

At the time that Lucius had offered himself to Albus Dumbledore in any capacity in which he could serve to defeat

Voldemort, he had not expected to live to see the Light triumph over the Dark. It had been with utter amazement that he had stood amidst the detritus of the Final Battle, in the wake of the firestorm which accompanied the fall of Tom Riddle, and gazed with disbelief upon the spectre of a world cleansed of the filth of the Death Eaters. Each moment of every day since then had been — embarrassingly enough — like a gift to be cherished. He had patiently attended the hearings after the war, admitted to his faults, and been supported by Dumbledore's testimony on his behalf. The three months of house arrest had been a sop thrown to the small, though vocal, angry mob who wished to see him in Azkaban; the people who now mattered to him knew his motivations, and accepted him back into their society. For Lucius Malfoy, it was a whole new world.

After much thought, Hermione had determined that it was enough for Dumbledore to profess faith in the elder Malfoy. From that point forward, she accepted his presence, and did what she could to suppress her natural distrust of a man who had raised his child to refer to Muggle-born witches and wizards as Mudbloods. Hermione was a firm believer in fairness. If it had been fair for Professor Snape to be forgiven for becoming a Death Eater, then it was fair also for Lucius Malfoy to be forgiven. Justice, of course, was another animal all together; Hermione was

deeply thankful that it was not her job to decide what was equitable and what was not.

If it had not been for the Law, which called for so much interaction between the unmarried witches and wizards of the affected age range, Hermione and Lucius might not have come across one another very often. As it was, they were fellow veterans with shared experiences and shared acquaintances, and they were able to socialize in a reasonably comfortable way.

Taking their seats across from one another at the tables on the sidewalk, Hermione and Lucius settled in with their ice cream sundaes. With an engaging grin, Hermione inquired, "So, has Professor Snape always been such a difficult person?"

Lucius considered her for a moment, then decided to see if he would be able to obtain any information on the matter which interested him. "Severus has always been a tad high-strung, Miss Granger, but he also has a brooding sadness about him that just seems to fascinate the fairer sex."

Hermione took another bite of strawberry ice cream with chocolate sauce as she digested this information. "It never seemed that he had female companions."

"Of course, teaching in a boarding school is not an ideal situation for a single man to be in if he wishes to pursue the ladies. And, I must say that the Dark Lord both

corrupted and disrupted one's existence. He was a time-consuming task master. So — now that he's gone, and the war is over, and Severus is free to finally take advantage of his new celebrity — what must the Ministry do but make him get married? Of course, it takes time for a man to get over twenty years of espionage, and to adapt himself to what passes for a normal life in these times." With a quick glance at his audience, Lucius dipped in for the plum. "But it still doesn't really account for his choice of..."

Hermione looked up sharply and Lucius stopped himself. "I'm sorry," he said, raising a napkin to hide the smile on his lips, "I forgot what I was going to say."

Setting her spoon down with great resolution, Hermione said, "Mr. Malfoy, you are the only person other than the Headmaster who has ever seemed to be Professor Snape's friend. If *you* think she's the wrong wife for him, then I don't see why I should have *any* scruples."

Lucius raised elegantly arched eyebrows. "You Miss Granger? Have no scruples? I am afraid I do not understand you."

"Just imagine it, Mr. Malfoy! I cannot bear to think of that annoying girl moving in with Sophronia and the girls at the Estuary, making them all miserable — and encouraging Professor Snape to be as domineering as he ever was at Hogwarts — it's too horrible to contemplate!"

Lucius shook his head with seeming sadness. "Oh, I really

don't see that there is anything that can be done about it. The engagement has been announced, the wedding date is set — it is almost a completed contract at this point, you know.”

Hermione leaned towards him earnestly. “If he loves her, then he should marry her — I'm not saying he shouldn't. But he *cannot* be permitted to inflict her upon his sisters and their mother — that just isn't fair.” She paused for a fraction of a moment and directed her eyes down to her dish of melting ice cream. In a lower voice, she continued, “I don't believe his heart is involved in his decision, though, Mr. Malfoy, and as for her — she *has* none!”

Lucius leaned toward her and lowered his voice, too. “She almost married the oldest Weasley boy, you know. Somehow, he got away just in time. The stories about her got around, after that. She's got Veela blood, you know, and a lot of men are drawn to her — but she can be quite a shrew when her will is crossed. Unfortunately, it is Severus who swam into her net. He's become a bit of a catch since his name has been cleared, and since his part in the war has become public knowledge.” He settled back again in his chair, regarding her sadly. “It is a shame, Miss Granger, but Severus is a man of honour and he has given his word. He couldn't break his engagement now if he wanted to.”

“*She* could.”

Lucius looked regretful. “I don't believe that will happen.”

Hermione gave him a tight smile as she began to gather her belongings. “We'll see,” she said. “At the very least, she must be prevented from making those girls unhappy.”

Lucius essayed a poke into the cage of the lioness. “There's nothing that can be done, I'm afraid.”

Hermione bristled. “That is what people say when they are too lazy or too frightened to make an effort to help. Well, I am neither lazy nor afraid, Mr. Malfoy. My friends used to tell me that I have a lot of nerve, but I'll tell you truly — after spending the last seven years of my life fighting to defeat Voldemort, I have no nerves left.” She stood. “I haven't decided what I'm going to do, but if I need your assistance, may I count on you?”

Lucius did a creditable imitation of looking alarmed.

In a reassuring way, Hermione continued, “Most likely I won't need you, so please don't fret. Now, if you will excuse me, I am off to meet with friends at the Leaky Cauldron. Thank you for the ice cream!”

Lucius watched her go with half a smile on his handsome face, before starting down the street in the other direction, humming to himself with great satisfaction.

Hermione walked from Fortescue's to the Leaky Cauldron; as she entered the darkened pub; it took a moment for her eyes to adjust from the bright summer sunshine. Before her vision cleared, Skye was at her side.

"I hate Fleur Delacour," Skye spat, her customarily lovely face marred by anger.

Hermione sat down at one of the tables and shook her head at the barman as he began to approach. "Now what?" she asked.

Skye began to speak quickly. "I ran into Harry when I was in Scribbulous Everchanging Inks with Katie and Cho; he and I came here to have a cold drink. Fleur and Val came in and found us together, and she insisted that they join us at our table. Then Ron came by to collect Harry for their lunch with Ron's parents — and as soon as Harry was gone, Fleur was horrid to me! She said that Harry and I were meeting clandestinely, behind Mama's back. And Val just sat there and *ogled* me."

Hermione sighed loudly. "Did she actually have the nerve to scold you?"

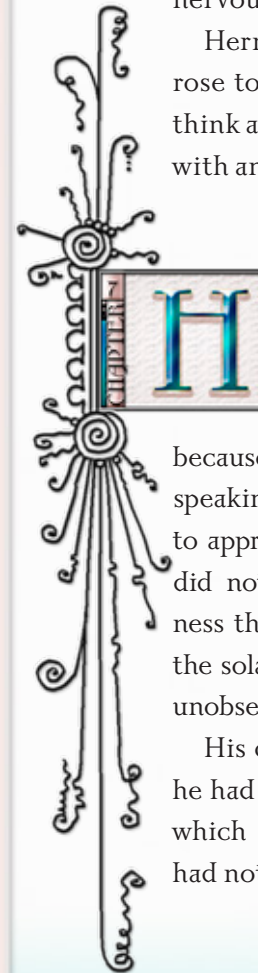
"Yes! And I am *furious*, Hermione! She makes it sound as if we were doing something shameful." Skye's eyes dropped to her hands, which she was wringing. "Then Fleur tried to make me leave with her, but I told her I was meeting you. I saw her go toward the Apparation point — and she ran into Severus and began talking to him. I know she told him I was sneaking off to see Harry without a chaperone."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Don't worry, Skye. Go find Katie and Cho and finish your shopping. I'm going home now and I'll talk to your brother. He probably won't say a

word to you about Harry or any other tales Fleur is carrying about you today."

Skye stared at her. "Hermione," she said nervously, "what are you going to do?"

Hermione patted Skye on the shoulder and rose to go. "I will give him something else to think about, of course," she said, walking away with an air of determination.



HERMIONE ENTERED the house from the back garden and moved quietly through the solarium. She paused in the doorway before passing into the hall because she saw Professor McGonagall there, speaking to Professor Snape. Hermione wanted to approach Snape in neutral territory, but she did not really want to have McGonagall witness their meeting. Accordingly, she tarried in the solarium, having the leisure to study Snape unobserved for the first time in a while.

His colour was good, if somewhat pale, and he had gained weight since the end of the war, which gave him a healthier appearance. She had noted, since coming to stay at Grimmauld

Place, that he no longer gave the impression of a man too involved with matters of consequence to be fussed with such unimportant issues as personal hygiene. She wondered if the change was due to an upswing in his own interest in such things, or if it had been forced upon him by Sophronia and the girls. She knew that Fleur Delacour could not be the responsible party; without the alteration in his appearance, Fleur would never have looked at him twice, war hero or not. Regardless of the reason, it was a vast improvement. His hair no longer appeared greasy, his teeth had become unremarkable by the conformity of both their colour and cleanliness, and he had some new clothes. The new clothes were admittedly identical to the old clothes, but at least were distinguished by a lack of shabbiness.

Other things about him had not changed at all. He was still tall and angular, with a lean grace, reminiscent of a great, predatory cat. His large, hooked nose and thin, cruel lips remained the dominant features of his face, which most frequently wore a sneer of unparalleled derision. His keen intelligence and rapier wit were also intact, and not to be underestimated — a fact of which Hermione was forcibly reminded when Professor McGonagall completed her conversation with him and proceeded up the staircase, and he whirled around and nailed her with his piercing black gaze.

“Did you *want* something, Miss Granger, or were you

just staring at my backside for entertainment purposes?”

Hermione could not prevent the colour that stained her cheeks, but she raised her chin and refused to lower her eyes in the face of these intimidation tactics.

“I have something particular to say to you, Professor.”

Snape’s eyes dropped to the shopping bag from Borgin and Burkes that she still held in her hands, then raised to her face. “By all means, Miss Granger. Say that *particular* thing.”

She approached him fearlessly. “I would prefer to speak with you privately; there is no need to share our conversation with the house-elves.”

One eyebrow quirked. “I have no objections. You may choose the room — provided it is not the library.”

Without dignifying this provocation with her notice, Hermione walked past him into the study, where she dumped her shopping bag into one chair while seating herself in another. Snape followed her in and closed the door, apparently preferring to prowl the room rather than sit with her.

By way of breaking the ice, she said, “Did you see Skye today? She looks so pretty with the new way she’s styling her hair.”

Snape stopped pacing to stand over her, drilling her with his rather hostile glare. “I did *not* see her, Miss Granger, and I have no interest in how she is styling —”

Hermione continued on, as if he had not spoken. “And isn’t she dashing? First she walked with Seamus, then she

had lemonade with Harry, then she sat with Val..."

Snape clenched his fists. "She is giving the entire town grist for the gossip mill! I will *not* have my sister spoken of as a 'fast' girl!"

Hermione, apparently unconcerned by having Snape towering over her with clenched fists, looked up into his face with a puzzled expression. "Now, who in the world would be spiteful enough to say that about Skye?" she wondered out loud.

She waited a moment for the answer and the implication to penetrate his anger, before moving smoothly into her next attack.

"You know, there's not a particle of harm in any of the Phoenix House boys, but if I were you, I would not encourage Skye to spend time alone with Val Delacour."

Snape's brows contracted to a frown. "I do not understand you."

Hermione's attention was fixed on the gold bracelet on her left wrist. "Let's just say that he's the type of wizard who would spike the punch with a lust potion and then use Obliviate the next morning."

Snape surprised her by sitting down in an unoccupied chair. "How do you know this?" he inquired in a changed tone.

Hermione shot him a glance from the corner of her eyes before resuming her examination of her bracelet. "If you're asking me if he's given me a tainted drink, the answer is no. But if you're asking if he has behaved

improperly with me, the answer is yes." At this point, she looked him directly in the eye. "He can't keep his hands to himself and his idea of conversation leaves a lot to be desired. I am a big girl, Professor. I went to a co-educational school, my two best friends are male, and I have fought in the field of battle against men, with men." She paused for a moment here, letting him add the unspoken "including you" in his own mind. "But Skye does not have those advantages. She's been schooled at home and is not as familiar with how to handle boys. *I* can manage Val just fine; I know you'll be able to drop a hint to Skye so that *she* knows not to be alone with him."

Now Snape was the one to let his eyes drop, his discomfort evident in his strained voice. "I am most displeased to hear that you have been imposed upon in any way while under my care. I will discourage his visits to this house and do what I can to deter him from joining our party at social events."

He seemed to be studying a ring, which he wore on the first finger of his right hand. Hermione did not recall ever having seen him wear a ring in the years when she had been his student. This one was a large, heavy signet; its plain white gold setting held a flat, square emerald, with a cunningly wrought silver "S" imposed on the stone. It occurred to her that he may have inherited it upon the passing of his father.

"You understand that this is an awkward situation for me,"

Snape said, his annoyance, for once, not directed at her.

"I can see that, and of course it would be really bad form for you to be carrying tales about her brother to Fleur," Hermione said in a sympathetic tone.

Snape's expression was a wonder to behold as he worked out the significance of her words. Hermione was keeping a straight face while enjoying an inward gloat when he surged to his feet and strode across the room, going on the counterattack.

"Do not think for a moment, Miss Granger, that I am not aware that you are encouraging Skye to sneak off and meet Potter behind her mother's back!"

"That is not true, Professor, and you know it."

He whirled around to face her. "Why would I say something I know to be untrue?" he demanded dangerously.

"You say outrageous things when you're angry," Hermione said in an off-hand way, reaching for her shopping bag. "Oh, and Professor, do tell Stormy that you're not going to make her go to that awful Muggle school in the village near the Estuary until she's old enough to go to Hogwarts. She's gotten it into her head that you don't believe she's been learning enough at home and that you're going to make her be the only non-Muggle child in the school."

This third shaft found its mark and Snape snarled, "Nonsense. Stormy will receive the same education her

sisters have received. She and Shadow will even attend Hogwarts, now that the war is over. Where would she get such a ridiculous idea?"

Hermione stood and moved toward the door. "You must ask her; I'm sure I don't know. She was just worrying last night about how she doesn't speak a word of French and has no idea where French Guiana is."

Pausing with her hand on the doorknob, Hermione took her parting shot. "Isn't it odd how often daughters grow up to be just like their mothers?"

Snape stared at her from across the room, his lips pressed together in a firm line, and did not respond.

"Just think of how Skye will be the spitting image of Sophronia when she gets to be that age, and so gentle and sweet, just like her."

She stayed only long enough to see the look of horror dawn on Snape's face, as he considered the prospect of spending his twilight years with the clone of Mrs. Delacour, before she slipped out of the room and left him to consider all the new ideas she had planted in his mind.

Snape listened until Miss Granger's tread could no longer be heard on the staircase before he left the study for the haven of the library. The girl infuriated him! How did she

dare sit there and make accusations against his fiancée?

He paused. *Had* she mentioned Fleur's name? Had she spoken one negative word about Fleur?

He flung himself into the chair behind the desk and searched his memory. She had said, 'Who was spiteful enough,' not 'Fleur is spiteful.' She had said, '...it would be bad form for *you* to carry tales to Fleur about her brother,' not 'It is bad form for Fleur to carry tales to you about Skye.'

As for Stormy attending the village school, that was ridiculous. But was it not Fleur who had mentioned to him that there were deficiencies in Stormy's education that she felt should be corrected? Was Fleur actually *quizzing* his youngest sister about her knowledge?

And women did *not* invariably grow to be like their mothers!

Did they?

For a grim moment his mind dwelt on Hélène Delacour, a woman who could give lessons in shrewishness to harpies-in-training.

Bugger.



Skye started nervously when Severus spoke her name. She paused on the stairs, looking down at him as he stood before the sitting room doorway.



"I am on my way down to dinner, Severus. Can't it wait?"

"I need only a moment."

She sighed inwardly and preceded him into the empty sitting room. "What is it?" she asked.

"Has Val Delacour been a nuisance to you?"

Skye's face flushed in embarrassment at the same instant that relief flooded her mind. She had been so sure he was about to rail at her about Harry! She pressed her hands to her cheeks, as if to force the colour away.

Severus was watching her closely. When she blushed, it was all the answer he needed. "I see," he said quietly, in a perfectly reasonable tone. "Why did you not tell me? I would not have you aggravated by that dunderhead for any reason, Skye."

"I was afraid it would make you really angry, Severus."

"It does make me very angry, Skye, but not angry with *you*. I am your brother; it is my duty to protect you from sleazy little berks like Val Delacour."

His tone bore a warmth she did not often hear from him; when she risked a look at his face, his lips were pressed together in an implacable crease, but his eyes were kind.

"I didn't want to make trouble between you and Fleur, Severus. And, I thought he would stop once your engagement was announced, and he knew we were going to be family." She risked placing her hand on his arm; he often flinched when one of his sisters touched him, but he did



not pull away from her this time, which she found to be an encouraging sign. "Please don't let it cause a fight with Fleur. I couldn't bear to be the cause of that."

Severus actually patted her hand once before taking it and placing it in the crook of his elbow as he began to lead her to the dining room for dinner. "You let me worry about that. I just want you to give me your word that you will tell me immediately if Val, or any other man, bothers you in any way."

Skye smiled at him with affection. "I promise, Severus," she said, praying that the stolen kiss Fleur had just missed in the Leaky Cauldron that day did not fall under her brother's definition of "bother."



Diagon Alley was dark beneath the clouds which scuttled across the half moon. Snape sat quietly in the green parlour at the Cave, sipping a glass of port and patiently waiting in ambush for his prey. He had not long to wait.

Below, he heard the bustle of an arrival, a voice lifted merrily bidding a greeting, followed by a promise to be along soon. The next moment the doorway into the room was darkened as Val Delacour entered.

"Good evening, Severus," he said as he began to cross the room.

"The door, Val." Snape spoke so quietly that Val barely



understood his words.

"The door?" He stopped, looking more foolish than usual in his confusion.

"I believe I said I wished to speak with you alone," Snape explained, gently.

"Oh, of course," Val said, a tiny flicker of alarm in his eyes. He returned to the door and closed it before advancing again across the room towards the decanters on the sideboard. When he heard the locks engaging behind him he actually looked around to see who had done it before the obvious dawned on him. Nervously, he eyed Snape, who gave him a dangerous smile.

"I know you would not wish our private talk to be interrupted."

The younger wizard swallowed with some difficulty. "Of course not," he agreed, completely forgetting that he had meant to pour himself a drink. He stood, as if rooted to the spot, and tried to find somewhere to put his suddenly shaky hands.

"Sit."

Val started when Snape spoke. "I think I'll stand," he said, trying to retain some control over the situation.

Snape placed his glass of port on the table in a swift motion and sat straighter in his chair. "My recommendation would be for you to try for a small measure of sense, Val. Do you wish to try what is left of my patience?"

Val caved and took the indicated seat across from his



sister's fiancé, reflecting that he had been a fool to fall for that, 'Let's have a drink at the Club,' from Snape earlier in the evening.

"I am meeting some friends below," Val said with some bravado.

"Good. I do not require much of your time."

Val shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "What is it, Severus?" he blurted.

"You are your father's only son, Val, is that not true?" Snape's eyes, like black tunnels, seemed to become larger and larger as Val sensed that he was about to fall into some dark abyss.

"You know it is," he croaked from a throat unaccountably dry. He looked longingly now at the wine across the room, but dared not stand.

"You intend to marry, to have sons, to perpetuate your family name?"

It was amazing to him how Snape's words became clearer as his volume decreased. "Yes, yes, I do," he agreed uneasily.

"Family is very important, as is family honour. One's family name is an asset to be highly prized — and as earnestly protected."

Val noted that the sardonic disdain he was accustomed to from this man was absent; for once, Snape seemed deadly serious.

Snape continued, "His conduct towards his family, for instance, is a standard by which a man may be judged — particularly the way a man treats the women in his life, women who have the right and the expectation of all of his respect and protection — wouldn't you agree?"

Snape paused a moment and arched an inquisitive eyebrow.

For all his stupidity, Val realized that it was a rhetorical question, and he made no effort to answer it.

"As our families are soon to be united, it is imperative for us to be aware that our actions will reflect each upon the other's family." Snape's unblinking stare made Val feel as if he were skewered to the chair, like a bug on a pin. Though it hardly seemed possible, Snape spoke more softly, still. "I would like to make it perfectly clear to you that I will not permit any stain to besmirch my family name. Therefore, I will be monitoring your activities with great interest. Do you understand me?"

"I... I think so..." Val stuttered.

Snape's tone cracked like a whip. "That is not sufficient, I'm afraid. You must be convinced as I am convinced — if you wish to leave this room."

Val felt his robes clinging to him, soaked through with the cold sweat that accompanied his visceral fear. Unsuccessfully, he tried to evade the unwavering regard of the fiend who sat across from him; in his terror, he felt sure

that Snape had somehow discovered every furtive act, every secret thought he had ever sought to hide.

Grasping at straws, he blurted, "But my sister..."

"Yes. Precisely. We must — and will — preserve her good name."

Snape then picked up his glass of wine and settled back into his chair, at his ease, with the air of a man who has all the time in the world to expend to achieve his ends.

In the silence of the ensuing moments, the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece was the only audible sound, though Val was not convinced that the implacable being across the table could not hear the pounding of his heart in his throat. Dimly, it came to him that he was in the presence of one of Voldemort's Death Eaters. Never in his experience had he encountered such a formidable force in human form.

In that moment, though he would have lied to save himself, he was sincere in his capitulation to the indomitable will before him.

"I understand you perfectly — you have no need to worry about me — I quite agree —"

Snape interrupted the pathetic grovelling, his voice cutting across the excessive assurances with razor sharp precision. "Enough. I will take you at your word — and I will hold you to it. You may go."

Then he picked up a book from the table before him

and began to read as if Val were not in the room.

Val waited a beat before rising and creeping toward his escape. When Snape spoke from behind him, he was thankful he had not been drinking, as his body showed every sign of wishing to evacuate all cavities.

"You may leave the door open."



Late the next morning, Snape gathered the attendees of the picnic at the Apparition point in the back garden, counting heads and cursing Minerva and her sciatica. A picnic, for the love of Merlin, in the middle of the blasted summer. If he had his way, he would set these children to partners by lottery, and be done with the entire damned mess.

They Apparated en masse, and upon arrival, the girls scattered to the four corners of the park. Snape sought out a quiet bench in the shade, and took his book from his pocket. The park was full of wizards and witches mingling with one another, tables groaning under the load of fabulous food, and house-elves quietly filling plates and serving drinks.

Hyde Park, still the most prestigious public park in all of London, was possessed of a feature the Muggles never suspected. Those two ancient yew trees, curving together to form the canopy of a perfect arch, were the gateway to the Wizard's Hyde Park. The anti-Muggle wards on the

shadowy spot made it difficult for non-wizarding folk to notice the leafy dome; any magical being who passed beneath the leaning yew trees entered the venerable Park which had been the gathering place of London's wizarding folk for the best part of three centuries. One could safely Apparate into and out of the park, but those with small children, or those who were so inclined, could stroll between the yews and enter a safe haven.

At least it was a decent day for a picnic, Snape reflected, with a cloudless sky and warm temperatures. He noted the arrival of Lupin and his cadre of young wizards, who quickly dispersed in search of the young ladies. Some of the young people carried brooms; Snape saw that the Quidditch pitch was already hosting an impromptu Quidditch match. If they were going to eat, and drink, and spoon, *and* play Quidditch, it was going to be an interminable afternoon.

Snape buried himself in his book and passed a happy half hour, until he saw Skye strolling toward the Quidditch pitch on the arm of Harry Potter. Stuffing his book back into his pocket, he stood to follow them, and was waylaid by his fiancée.

"Severus!" Fleur cried, advancing on him with her hands outstretched. "You waited for me! How sweet!"

Snape obediently clasped her hands and gave them a squeeze, while appearing not to notice her face lifted for a kiss. "Was I supposed to meet you here this afternoon?" he asked.

Fleur latched onto his arm. "I owed Sophronia this morning to let her know I would be here," she told him with a slightly affronted look.

"Then I am sorry I didn't receive your message." He attempted to nip the looming temper tantrum in the bud. "Shall we walk? I thought I would go look at the Quidditch pitch."

Fleur laughed disdainfully. "Men cannot help themselves when it comes to Quidditch. Val was going to play, but he decided not to come to the picnic after all."

Hearing this report with grim satisfaction, Severus gave his betrothed a tight smile before escorting her to the pitch.



Sophronia strolled beneath the yew trees with Shadow and Stormy by her side, and with Winky respectfully following in their wake. A frivolous parasol shaded Sophronia's porcelain complexion from the injurious sunlight. She wore a floating, gauzy dress in a delicate blue just one shade darker than her eyes. Her progress was well noted by every man past the age of puberty who happened to glance up as she passed by.

Winky spread their rug beneath the shade of the tree Sophronia chose, and Sophronia settled herself there with perfect contentment. Before she had drawn two

breaths, Ronald Weasley appeared, almost as if by prearrangement, and asked permission to walk with Shadow to watch the Quidditch games. Once he had solemnly promised to return Shadow to her mama in no more than two hours, she waved them away. Next, she allowed Stormy to prance off, with Winky in tow, to join the other children romping under the watchful eyes of house-elves.

The young widow Snape and her fair-haired, blue-eyed daughters made an enchanting picture for one watcher, who had lain in wait for her arrival. Pleased to see the girls so quickly dispatched, Lucius Malfoy took one more moment to admire the pretty picture made by Sophronia before he seized a glass of champagne and approached her from behind. He was down on one knee by her side with a perfectly chilled flute of sparkling wine held tantalizingly on level with her lovely mouth before she realized that he had lifted her left hand to his lips.

“Mr. Malfoy!” she said in surprise, drawing her hand gently away, while politely accepting the wine glass.

Lucius, who was handsome in cold repose, was well nigh irresistible when he truly laughed, which he did now, seating himself by her side with graceful ease. “Sophronia!” he said wickedly, eliciting a small gurgle of laughter from her, “How can you? Must I call you Madam Snape? I don’t think I can!”

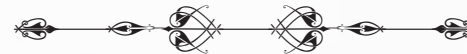
Sophronia dimpled briefly in response to his playfulness, before recalling herself and looking prim. “It is my name, sir, as you must know.”

Lucius extended one finger, which passed over the back of the hand holding the champagne flute with barely a whisper of contact. “It wasn’t your name when you broke my poor, poor heart,” he said in a wistful tone, darting a roguish look at her from beneath his eyelashes.

Sophronia’s hand quivered at the near-contact and a trickle of wine splashed onto the rug. “It would serve you right if I spilt champagne all in your hair,” she scolded, accepting his readily produced handkerchief to mop up the cold wine. “And don’t you dare speak to me of broken hearts, Lucius Malfoy. As soon as Narcissa Black deigned to notice you, I was quite forgotten.”

At the mention of Narcissa’s name, Sophronia’s eyes flew to his, and she reached out a compassionate hand to touch his sleeve. “I was so sorry to hear, Lucius — so sorry,” she said quietly.

Lucius looked into those kind eyes, and at the beautiful, peaceful face, and his carefully laid plans shifted.



Stands for the informal Quidditch games surrounded the pitch; it was there that Snape expected to find Skye.

He was not disappointed. She sat — with Granger, no less — and the two of them were surrounded by wizards. He was pleased to see that Potter was nowhere to be found, until he saw Skye's attention riveted on the airborne battle.

Granger was paying no attention to the game. She was in conversation with no fewer than seven different young men, all of whom seemed to be vying for her attention. As Snape and Fleur drew near to the group, he heard a general round of laughter in response to some Granger witticism — then they spied him.

Hermione saw the change in expression on the faces of the blokes on the row behind her; when Seamus, Neville, and Lee Jordan all quit laughing and instinctively rose to their feet, she knew that Professor Snape could not be far away.

Snape escorted Fleur to the seats deserted by the Gryffindors, who hastily joined the Weasley twins several rows away.



Ron and Shadow reached the Quidditch pitch to find the informal match already in progress.

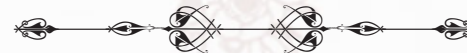
"Oh, Ron, you wanted to play!" Shadow exclaimed. "I'm so sorry! I just couldn't get Mum to hurry!"

Ron smiled down at her. "I would much rather spend time with you," he told her simply.

Shadow was in such a glow after that, she could barely



pay any mind to the introductions. She remembered that the two noisy older redheaded men were Ron's twin brothers, and the identical women with them were named Patil; she wondered briefly how the four of them managed to sort out who was whose date, but there were so many more people to meet. Sitting next to Nymphadora Tonks there was a pretty older lady, introduced as Professor Vector; she was apparently the chaperone for the girls from Ravenclaw. Sitting near her were Marietta Edgecomb, who seemed particularly cold to Ron, and Morag McDougal. Then Shadow saw the other Gryffindor boys coming toward them, and she quickly hid herself in the middle of the Ravenclaw group, as her dreaded older brother descended upon poor Skye.



Luna Lovegood sat alone in a section of the stands, watching the Quidditch game. Harry Potter was flying aggressively against the other Seeker, who was giving as good as he got. The white blond hair of Harry's competitor identified him as Draco Malfoy. Ginny Weasley suddenly darted between the two Seekers, just in time to catch the Quaffle, and she was off toward the goal hoop, laughing in utter joy as she flew close enough to hurl the Quaffle and score a goal. Luna clapped in appreciation of the fine



play and watched as Harry shared a high-five with the point-scoring redhead. Then the opposing Seeker buzzed Harry before sheering off at an impossible upward angle, and Harry flattened himself on his Firebolt and followed. The two raced higher and higher, until the blond reversed himself and began spiralling down with Harry on his tail, now two blurs hurtling toward the ground, one black-haired, the other white.

“Damn, I’m good,” said a drawling voice in Luna’s ear.

With a start, she glanced to her left and saw Draco Malfoy, lounging back with his elbows on the bench behind him. His grey eyes were slanted down at her face, and a self-deprecating sneer was on his lips.

Luna jerked her head back in time to see Harry Potter plough into the ground just as the other Seeker seized the Snitch and rose back up into the air to the applause of the watchers.

“You *are* good,” she said, watching the victorious Seeker doing a victory lap around the pitch.

Draco snickered. “I wish my mum could’ve seen me,” he said musingly.

Luna looked back to him. “Your mum died too, didn’t she?”

Draco nodded, his eyes on the crowd gathering around where Harry sprawled on the ground.

“My mum died when I was nine,” Luna said, her prominent blue eyes fixed on Draco’s face.

Draco turned his head until grey eyes met blue. “I know.”
Luna studied his face with frank curiosity. “I still miss her,” she said.

Draco nodded. “I miss mine, too.”

A shout of laughter from the group on the ground attracted their attention to Harry, who was standing, with an obviously bloody nose, and laughing with Ronald and Ginny Weasley.

The other Draco was flying toward the group on the ground. “How did you do it?” Luna inquired. “That’s advanced magic.”

Draco snorted. “No it isn’t. It’s just a glamour — that’s Viktor Krum. He wanted to play a joke on Potter, make him think he was flying against me. Looks like Potter thinks it’s pretty funny.”

Luna watched as Krum landed. With a flourish of his wand, he removed the glamour before going over to receive a clap on the back and a hearty handshake from Harry. More of their friends were pouring onto the pitch now, with a number of the girls giggling as they swarmed towards Viktor. Tonks, however, reached him first, her heart-shaped face alight with laughter. In a burst of spontaneity, Viktor caught Tonks up in a hug; when she impulsively threw her arms about his neck, Viktor twined his fingers in her spiky pink hair and kissed her mouth.

Draco stood and held out a friendly hand to Luna. "Let's go get something to eat."

Luna took the proffered hand and walked away with the best-looking boy in the park, wondering why he wanted to be with her.



Skye sat beside Hermione, pointedly ignoring Severus and Fleur, watching Harry play Quidditch with a certain degree of pride. He wasn't her boyfriend, exactly, but she did fancy him in a way that disturbed her peace more than any other boy had ever done. It wasn't just that he was Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, but he had the most beautiful green eyes she had ever seen, as well as the sweetest smile she could imagine. And he thought she was everything that was perfect in a girl — who could resist that kind of adoration?

When she watched the mad race for the Snitch, she found herself shouting, "Go, Harry, go!" along with Hermione. When he slammed into the ground, she started up in alarm. "Oh no!"

Hermione stood up too. "Don't worry, Skye, I've seen him fall off from 50 feet and walk away; let's go see if he needs to be mopped up."

Without a word to Snape or Fleur, they walked down the stands and approached the crowd around Harry. When Viktor



landed and removed the glamour, Skye stopped in her tracks.

"Viktor Krum!" she breathed in a tone approaching reverence.

Hermione looked at her with mild amusement. "Do you know Viktor?"

Skye shook her head. "No, but everyone knows who he is, don't they?"

Hermione linked arms with her. "Come on, I'll introduce you."

"Do you know him?" Skye asked, impressed.

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "You could say that. Come on." She led Skye right past Harry, who gazed after them with a slight look of hurt in his eyes.

Then Tonks rushed past them, into Viktor's arms. Hermione chuckled, but Skye looked a bit regretful.

"Maybe I'll introduce you in a minute," Hermione said, turning her attention back to Harry.



Remus Lupin slipped onto the bench behind Severus and Fleur just before Harry wiped out on the ground.

"That's not Draco," he said, watching the other Seeker fly away with the Snitch.

Snape snorted. "Of course it isn't. Draco is sitting with Miss Lovegood." He inclined his head where, several



rows ahead and to the left, the two blond heads were bent together in conversation.

Lupin watched the Draco-look-alike fly. "Who is he?"

Snape slanted a sneer Lupin's way. "Would you like to wager against him being that Bulgarian Quidditch player that Miss Granger delights in displaying all over town?"

Lupin smiled. "Hermione has not been displaying *anyone* all over town, Severus. But Krum is dark — that man is fair-haired."

At that moment, the man in question gained the ground and removed the glamour. Lupin chuckled. "Looks like you're right, Severus."

Fleur cast Lupin a scornful glance. "He usually is, Professor Lupin."

Lupin made her no reply, for at that moment, he saw the woman for whom he had offered marriage fling herself in to another man's arms and accept a shameless kiss with upwards of fifty witnesses.

Snape looked as if Christmas had come early.

"How *are* those details coming along, Lupin?" he asked in his silkiest voice.

Lupin stood abruptly.

"Please make sure the boys get home, Severus," he said, then Apparated away.

HERMIONE APPARATED into the back garden at Grimmauld Place and found Lupin disconsolately gazing in the direction of the Phoenix House. He started when she appeared and made an effort at nonchalance.

"Hullo, Hermione. Leaving the picnic early?"

Hermione approached him with a quick step and grasped his hands. "Oh, Remus, you mustn't take it seriously!"

Lupin looked down into her sympathetic brown eyes with a twisted smile. "Oh, *Sirius* isn't my problem anymore. He got bored and is haunting Varen Vector, now, but she won't give him the time of day."

Hermione allowed herself to be distracted. "Why ever not?"

Lupin replied, "Varen was at school with us — a couple of years behind us, really — so she

remembers Sirius at that age. He was a bit of a heartbreaker and a cad, even then; he was never with any girl for very long. Besides, Varen was in Slytherin House and still has a certain regard for the house rivalry from those days." A ghost of a smile touched Lupin's eyes as he squeezed her hand. "Sirius is still declaring to me that he means to remain available until *your* affairs are settled. He can be an unmitigated berk, but his loyalty is unshakeable. He owes his escape from the Dementor's Kiss to you, Hermione. He won't forget that."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "That isn't what I left the picnic early to speak with you about, Remus. Would you mind awfully much if I ask if you still want to marry Tonks? Feel free to tell me to mind my own business, if you like."

Lupin closed his eyes for a brief moment. "Would you think I'm pathetic if I say yes?"

"Of course not!" Hermione responded warmly, leading him to the bench beneath the beech tree. "But you have to see it from her point of view, Remus. Instead of sweeping Tonks off her feet, you made your formal offer to Dumbledore..."

"It's the proper way to initiate a marriage contract!" he objected.

"Well, of course it's proper, Remus, but then you came down with a desperately infectious illness before you could woo her and officially ask her to marry you!"

"I did NOT contract wolf pox on purpose! I couldn't help



it!" He clasped his hands and stared down at them. When he spoke again, his voice was so soft Hermione had to strain to hear him. "I thought she wanted me, you see."

"I suspect that she still does, Remus, but you went away unexpectedly without a word to her, not even a note, and then what could she do but try to make you sorry?"

He stared at her with a fair assumption of indignation. "But I was ILL!" he protested.

"Oh, that was a minor detail of little importance when Sirius got the urge to see if he could play Lancelot to your King Arthur and began to dally with Guinevere." Hermione leaned toward him and lowered her voice confidentially. "If you still want to marry Tonks — and I must tell you that I think you and she would make a perfect match — I will tell you just how to go about it."

Lupin could not help but smile at her. "I am obliged to you, Hermione, but I cannot permit you to help me when it is *your* job to find a husband for yourself before the New Year!"

Hermione wrinkled her nose and looked mischievous. "I will be doing both things at once, Remus; you must trust me. This is an excellent way for me to move my situation along."

Lupin eyed her with suspicion. "Hermione, what are you up to?"

But she would only shake her head. "Never mind! Now, here's what I want for you to do..."





Mindful of his instructions, Lupin called in Grimmauld Place that evening, after dinner, and requested to speak with Tonks in private.

Tonks was sitting in the parlour at the top of the house with Sophronia, Skye, Hermione, and Professor McGonagall when Dobby carried the message upstairs. Tonks cast a panicked look around the group.

Minerva McGonagall spoke up. Though she had been absent that day from the picnic, Snape had informed her of the Krum-kiss-incident with malicious glee.

“Nymphadora Tonks,” McGonagall said, with some exasperation, “the man made a formal offer for you, and has been waiting for WEEKS for you to make up your mind. The least you can do it speak with him now!”

When Sophronia added her quietly spoken agreement, Tonks went downstairs with the air of the condemned woman on her way to the executioner. She entered the study and closed the door behind her.

Lupin took her by surprise, coming up to her with a rueful smile on his face.

“Don’t look like that, Tonks. I haven’t come to make an ugly scene.”

Tonks smiled at him. “You really *are* a nice man, Remus.”



Reflecting that he would rather be an international Quidditch star, he gave himself a mental shake and doggedly continued with his mission. “I’ve just come to tell you that I will withdraw my offer, Tonks. It was never my intention to cause you distress.”

Tonks felt her eyes fill with tears. No one else, certainly neither Sirius nor Viktor, had said a word to her about marriage. Now, the nicest man she knew wasn’t demanding an answer to his proposal — he was withdrawing it. NO one wanted to marry her. Remus wasn’t a reckless, handsome flirt, like Sirius, nor was he a famous and sought-after charmer, like Viktor — but he was kind, and caring, and he would make an excellent husband — what was the *matter* with her? She would undoubtedly end up as one of the pathetic cases handled by the Office of Last Resort, as the Office of Lasting Relationships was lampooned by the young people.

Remus, seeing the tears in her eyes, felt a momentary urge to gather her into his arms and kiss her tears away. Then the image of her flinging herself into the arms of another man filled his mind and his determination firmed. He pressed a handkerchief into Tonks’ hand and said, “Even if we can’t be married, I will always want to be your friend. If there is ever any way I can serve you, Tonks, all you have to do is ask.”



Her tears overflowed then and she made use of his handkerchief. "Thanks, Remus," she managed after a moment. "You are a mate."

Lupin did not trust himself speak again, but kissed her hand and escaped the room. He passed Snape in the hallway without a word; his only goal was to exit the house before he made a fool of himself by returning to the study and begging the adorable girl to be his wife.

Snape found Tonks standing by the study window, wiping her eyes.

"Did you come to some agreement with Lupin?" he asked carefully.

"Yes — we've agreed that we don't suit."

For a moment, the vision of Ted Tonks' death grip on the hem of his robes invaded Snape's mind, but he shoved the memory away. Unfortunately, the sense of guilt and responsibility remained. "And is there someone, perhaps, who might suit you? Someone you know?"

Tonks turned her tear-ravaged face to him. "No, Severus. There isn't anyone."

And with a little choked sob, Tonks ran from the room.



It had become a Sunday night custom for the ladies of number twelve, Grimmauld Place to host a buffet supper



and congenial family-type evening for their particular friends. The house-elves would prepare and lay out a selection of foods on the sideboard, and each person could serve themselves as their mood and the hunger struck them. In the sitting room, tables were set out for games to be played. There was a table bearing a chess set, a card table, and a larger round table set up for whatever juvenile games suggested themselves to the younger people. On one memorable Sunday evening, the solarium had been swept bare of furniture and plants while the young people danced to strange music from a device supplied by Justin Finch-Fletchley; it was powered by something called "batteries."

Hermione had taken pains to include Stormy in the events of the at-home evenings, and the little girl glowed under the attention from her older sisters, their friends, and their many young admirers. Harking back to her favourite games as a child, Hermione had sallied forth to the Muggle shops and brought back a can of Pick-Up Stix. The slender sticks of coloured plastic were a huge hit with Stormy, who regularly challenged all comers to a contest of skill at nimbly picking up the chosen stick — and no magic allowed! — without displacing the others. The game, which became a passionate interest of the young wizards when they saw how much the Snape sisters enjoyed it, usually inspired at least one monetary bet per



evening amongst the young men.

Snape generally eschewed these family gatherings. Sunday was the one day of the week when he could be assured there would be no annoying Ministry event to attend or chaperone. He would spend the morning reading in the library, followed by an afternoon of writing and research, finishing with a quiet evening of drinks and occasional good company at the Cave. When forced — no, when *urged* — he made a visit to his betrothed. He reasoned with himself that, soon enough, he would be tied to the Delacours, and would have to endure the constant daily presence of Fleur. For now, he would enjoy his last few weeks of freedom, before his life changed forever.

It was only after stumbling across Remus Lupin at Grimmauld Place for the fourth time in one week following the ill-fated picnic, and each time in the company of Miss Granger, that he decided it was time for him to spend a Sunday evening at home. He did not, however, let his family know of his intentions; he thought he would follow his usual pattern and simply come home quite early from the club.

On the next Sunday evening, number twelve, Grimmauld Place was full of merriment. All of the boys from Phoenix House were present, as well as numerous other friends and acquaintances. Lucius Malfoy had dumbfounded his son by strolling into the drawing room as

if he were in the habit of doing so, and had bowed over Sophronia's hand with a charming smile.

Draco, who was sitting with Luna, muttered, "I wonder what he's up to?"

Luna looked up at his profile, feeling her heart fluttering in her chest at the beauty of him, and said in her frank way, "You don't trust your father, do you?"

Draco looked down into her upturned face and felt an unfamiliar disturbance in his breathing. The absurd earrings she wore, shaped like smiling daisies, were painfully sweet. Draco was not accustomed to having his empathy evoked, and certainly not by this unaccountably strange girl. But he had seen her that day at the Riddle estate, back-to-back with Ginny Weasley, fiercely duelling Death Eaters twice their size as part of the perimeter defence. Dumbledore had been adamant in his instructions that day: no Death Eaters were to escape alive. She may be odd, but there was a bedrock of courage in Luna Lovegood that made her a formidable ally.

Luna, who was looking with unconcealed admiration up into Draco's grey eyes, watched the thoughts and emotions playing across his face with fascination. He was looking at her mouth — what if he wanted to kiss her? There was a swooping sensation in her tummy at the thought of the best-looking boy she knew pressing a kiss to her lips.

The only boy she had ever kissed was Neville Longbottom, and that was only because they were coerced into playing Spin the Bottle. She had fled the room where the bottle was being spun after the messy ordeal that had been her first kiss. She was eager to try again though; other girls certainly seemed to enjoy kissing well enough.

Draco found himself leaning down toward Luna, his head tilted slightly to one side; he saw her eyelids drop as she lifted her lips trustingly to him and the golden blonde of her eyelashes fluttered on her pale cheek. With a sudden recollection of their surroundings, in the sitting room with people moving all around them, he knew it was the wrong time to taste the lips which tempted him. With an uncharacteristic show of tenderness, he cupped her chin and passed the pad of his thumb gently over her lower lip.

Luna's eyes opened and she felt a bit of disappointment, but the look on Draco's face was at once curious and exciting.

"No, I don't trust him very much," Draco admitted, his voice sounding a bit gruff as he regretfully removed his hand from her face. "He hasn't always been a very nice person. I really like Sophronia Snape; if my father is unkind to her, he'll be sorry."

There was a rustle of movement in the doorway as Ginny Weasley slipped into the room, looking particularly pretty

in a golden robe that simultaneously shimmered with her movement and clung to curves in a most interesting way. Luna saw her with a bit of a sinking heart; Draco had been spending quite a bit of time chatting with Ginny in the last few weeks, and Luna knew she wasn't nearly as pretty or as interesting as Ginny Weasley. But then Draco was much too handsome for her, anyway. Luna knew that most other people laughed at her for being the way she was; she realized that she was destined for some much more prosaic person, not a young god of masculine beauty like Draco Malfoy.

As they watched her, Ginny glanced quickly around the room, her gaze coming to rest on Harry Potter, where he stood by the mantelpiece, laughing with Roger Davies and Ron Weasley. Harry looked up as Ginny's eyes found him, almost as if he sensed the force of her attention; green eyes met brown, and he fell silent as he looked at her in her shimmering golden robes. Ginny's lips parted, as if a momentous word would pass from them, and Harry actually took a step in her direction. At that instant, Skye Snape swirled up to the boys by the fireplace in a cloud of ethereal blue, never doubting her welcome in their midst, her face alight with a pretty laugh that captured the notice of all three of the young wizards. Skye engaged Harry's attention with a gentle smile into his eyes; a few seconds later, when Harry thought to glance back at Ginny, she was gone.

Luna and Draco witnessed this entire interplay with some embarrassment, feeling as if they had been eavesdropping on a private conversation, though not a word had been spoken. When Ginny whirled in a flurry of gossamer golden fabric, her eye fell on Draco and she advanced on him like a tigress stalking her prey. Luna's heart was wrenched with pity for Ginny; in that moment, it had seemed to her that Ginny wanted Harry to come speak with her more than anything in the world, but he had chosen to speak with Skye instead. Luna knew very well what that felt like. Ginny had always been kind to her, including her in activities that she would never have attended without Ginny's sponsorship. Without a thought for herself, Luna stood and smiled at Ginny's approach.

"Here, Ginny, have my seat. I forgot I need to Floo Daddy tonight; I'll be back later." With a fleeting smile at a bemused Draco, Luna floated out of the sitting room in her distracted way, heading for the stairway.

Lucius Malfoy, invited to seat himself on an unoccupied loveseat with Sophronia, was a bit surprised to find himself facing Fleur Delacour. With practiced social ease, he gently twitted her for the absence of her fiancé.

Fleur shrugged with Gallic fatalism. "Severus does not care for such gatherings," she said philosophically, casting a shrewd glance at Skye and Harry as they laughed together

just beyond eavesdropping range. "When we are married, I do not suppose that we will entertain very often."

"How unfortunate," Lucius said solemnly.

Fleur flicked him a look of vague dislike. "When one has love, what does one need with the society of mere acquaintances?"

Lucius nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, if one has love, one needs no other company," he agreed, stretching out a hand to pick up the cut glass dish on the table at his elbow, and inspecting the cashews within. "But whatever will you and *Severus* do without company, Miss Delacour?"

An ugly red stain flushed her cheeks as she unwisely rose to the bait. Before she could utter the words on the tip of her tongue, Lucius extended the dish to her. "Nuts, mademoiselle?"

Fleur was on her feet and flouncing away before Lucius allowed the wicked smile he had been holding back to grace his handsome features. Sophronia removed the bowl of nuts from his hand and placed it on a different surface. "That was a bit unkind, wasn't it?" she inquired softly.

Lucius captured one of her hands and raised it to his lips. "I would not distress you for the world, my dear," he said, allowing himself the luxury of being lost in her bluebell eyes.

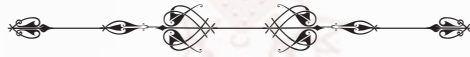
Sophronia gently removed her hand from his and indulged the temptation to step into a tension-fraught moment with

him for one beat of her heart before she lowered her gaze to her hands and folded them serenely in her lap. "I have the greatest dislike of unpleasantness," she admitted.

Lucius took one long finger and lifted her chin, then took his hand away quickly, so that she would not pull away from him. He risked leaning just a tad closer to her before whispering, "Admit that you loathe the girl, you rogue."

Sophronia dimpled briefly before standing and evading their ever-increasing proximity. "Would you excuse me for a moment?" she said politely.

"For as many moments as I must, if you promise to come back," he told her.



Fleur emerged from the lavatory with her head held high. She would not permit herself to show her temper to that man; he was a nonentity, after all, he barely escaped going to prison, from what she understood. No one considered *him* to be a hero; *he* certainly had won no Order of Merlin for his part in the war. No, he was a nobody and a nothing and she loathed and despised him.

She was startled out of her ponderings when Hermione Granger literally stumbled into her.

"Watch where you're going!" Fleur snapped irritably.

"I beg your pardon," Hermione said with slightly exag-



gerated politeness, "but what do you expect when you stand in the doorway to the nearest bathroom?"

Fleur tossed her head disdainfully and her ribbons of silver hair flew about her head. "Never mind." Her eyes narrowed for a moment and she reached out a hand to touch Hermione's arm. "I have been wishing to speak with you, Miss Granger — would now be a good time?"

With an inward gloat, Hermione allowed herself to be pulled into the room across the hall, which just happened to be Ginny and Luna's room.

"Yes, what is it?" she asked.

"I know that your mother is away on holiday," Fleur began, seating herself on Ginny's bed, and motioning for Hermione to sit next to her. Hermione willingly took the place next to Fleur. "Because your mother is away, you may be in need of a... guiding hand," she continued self-importantly.

Hermione cocked her head to one side. "How could I be in need of guidance when Minerva and Sophronia are in residence? Not to mention Professor Snape, of course," she added, dipping her chin in a show of shyness, while darting a sharp look in the Frenchwoman's direction.

Fleur waved one hand expansively. "Older women forget what it is to be young and full of passion," she opined.

Hermione snorted to herself. 'You're about as full of passion as Stormy's Pygmy Puff,' she thought. Fixing a look of



docility on her face, she responded out loud, "How true!"

Fleur reached out and grasped Hermione's wrist. "Then you mustn't be upset if I drop a hint in your ear," she said, trying to look older and wiser. "You have not been out in society for very long, and you can be guided by me in this matter, just as I would be guided by you if I were trying to live in the Muggle world."

Hermione gave a fair imitation of an innocent blink. "Oh no, Miss Delacour, I would *never* presume to tell you how to go on — no matter where we were or what we were doing."

Fleur, who was apparently immune to irony, continued on. "Well, perhaps you are right. I have been so well brought up by my dear *mère* that I would know how to conduct myself no matter where I went, in Muggle society or wizard society."

Hermione could not prevent then the choke of laughter which escaped her. Fleur regarded her with imperial hauteur.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Delacour, but surely even you can see how very conceited a notion that is!"

Fleur stood suddenly and glared down her nose at Hermione in an unconscious parody of her fiancé. "I know nothing of conceit. What I wish to say to you, is that you are making yourself conspicuous with the number of men who visit you here, and with whom you are seen all over town. All the world is talking about the fast Miss Granger and her many admirers. I'm sure you do not want that,



Miss Granger. Think how very uncomfortable it must be for Madam Snape to be forever making excuses for your very odd behaviour. And what wizard would want to offer for a woman who has earned for herself the reputation of being fast and loose with her affections?"

Hermione rose with a speed that caused the taller woman to step back and grope for her wand; Hermione however, was holding Fleur's wand by its tip in one hand while the other hand levelled her wand at Fleur's face.

"You had best *be* a bit concerned about *what wizard* might want me, Miss Delacour."

There was a long moment filled with nothing but the fast, panicked breathing of Fleur, who was desperately trying to use an unspoken spell to *Accio* her wand from Hermione's contemptuous fingertips, and the slow, even breathing of Hermione, who was trying to decide which part of the other witch's perfect body she wanted to hex. Their confrontation was interrupted by Luna, who poked her head into the room.

"Professor Lupin is here, Hermione, and he's asking for you," she said. Then she came fully into the room and looked from Fleur to Hermione and back. "Are you going to duel?" she inquired curiously.

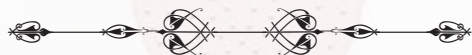
Hermione dropped the other wand disrespectfully onto the floor and pushed past Fleur. "I wouldn't dirty my



wand," she muttered as she walked out of the room.

"Severus will hear of this!" the other woman's shrill voice threatened.

Hermione continued toward the staircase without looking back. "Oh, I sincerely hope so," she said, giving herself a mental shake before dancing down the steps and making a great show of kissing Remus on the cheek before the assembled crowd, which included the recently arrived Nymphadora Tonks, with Viktor Krum in tow.



Fleur entered the sitting room again without glancing towards the Pick-Up Stix players laughing at the games table.

"Would you like to come play, Fleur?" Stormy called to her in a friendly way, before deftly removing a red stick from the pile before her.

Fleur did not halt in her progress towards Sophronia, who was smiling and patting the seat next to her on the sofa. "I do not play children's games," she said in passing. Some remark was made that caused the game players to explode into choked snickers and fake coughs; Fleur did not have to think very hard about who might have said something derogatory about her when she knew that Hermione Granger was sitting at that table.

Lucius Malfoy had gone to the drinks table and poured



himself a glass of brandy; Remus Lupin, in the act of procuring a glass of lemonade for Hermione from the iced pitcher on the tray, paused to exchange civil words with his former enemy.

Calming somewhat under Sophronia's kind-hearted attentions, Fleur was able to join a conversation begun by Minerva McGonagall concerning the social rules pertaining in her youth, many years before. Fleur, having been lectured on this subject by her veela grandmother, was able to contribute information to illustrate how English ways differed from those in France. When Lucius Malfoy wandered back over and joined them, she simply pretended he was not there.

"All of the balls were formal, when I was a girl," Minerva said. "The witches wore beautiful gowns in the most exotic fabrics; I remember a dress I had that was made of hand-woven faerie silk."

Sophronia nodded, a far-away look in her eye. "The year that Millicent Bagnold became Minister for Magic, there was a formal ball at Hogwarts in her honour. I was only fourteen, but I remember it vividly. The wizards looked so elegant in their dress robes and the witches wore the most colourful gowns I have ever seen. There has never been another ball like it."

Lucius was standing at Sophronia's elbow, between the



sofa and the armchair in which McGonagall sat.

“And do you remember with whom you danced your first dance that night?” he said wistfully.

Sophonra cast him a sidelong look. “If you don’t remember, I will not humiliate myself by saying,” she responded with the faintest blush in her cheek.



The consternation on the faces of the various people who saw Snape when he stepped into the sitting room and simply stood, strafing the room with his sharp gaze, might have amused him, if he had been in the mood to be amused. Ronald Weasley was sitting quietly in the corner, closely attending to what Shadow was saying to him with such an earnest expression on her face. Why did not Sophronia force the girl to join the group at the table? And at the table, there was Skye, with Potter on one side and Krum on the other, urging her on in the game of Pick-Up Stix, each of them having apparently backed her to win the contest. Stormy was clinging to Potter’s arm, squealing in her over-excitement. And there was Nymphadora Tonks, sitting on Krum’s other side, looking rather put-out, though her attention seemed to be focused across the table, rather than on Krum’s attentions to Skye.

Following Tonks’ line of sight, he saw the object of her



ire. Sitting on the edge of her chair, her eyes closed in a dramatic show of gathering her wits for her next turn at the Pick-Up Stix, was Hermione Granger. When had her hair stopped looking like a mare’s nest and begun to resemble the corkscrew tresses of a water nymph, tumbling about her face and down her back in an ash brown cascade? Why had he never noticed how her facial characteristics had matured, with the roundness of her girlhood features replaced by the fascinating hollows of her cheeks and the lovely line of her throat leading to her... and what the HELL was she doing wearing a tight jumper with such a low neckline that her impressive cleavage was on display for one and all to see? And why in the DEVIL was Remus Lupin putting his hands on her shoulders, ostensibly rubbing them to relax her, and leaning over to whisper in her ear?

What kinds of *orgies* were his charges getting up to in his absence every Sunday night?

He had actually begun to reach with his left hand for his wand when his right arm was grabbed and the voice he least wished to hear in that moment said, “Severus! Darling!”

At the sound of Fleur’s greeting, many of the faces at the table turned to see him there. Miss Granger, however, merely opened her eyes, as she sat there so wantonly with the werewolf’s paws all over her, and stared straight into his eyes. For the veriest instant, it was as if no one else



were in the room, and his indignation was met by the tiniest trace of a gratified, questioning look from her.

Then the sounds in the room rushed in upon them, and Severus was looking down his hooked nose at the woman hanging from his arm. The numerous ex-students of his in the room waited with bated breath for the verbal annihilation of the annoying Frenchwoman, but it didn't come.

Snape turned away from the table and led Fleur over to the sofa where Sophronia sat, in close conversation with Lucius Malfoy. After courteously seating Fleur, Snape procured the requested glass of sherry for her, and poured a measure of brandy for himself.

"What do you say, Severus — I believe I will host a formal ball at the Manor," Lucius said blandly, watching his old friend from beneath his lashes.

"Sophronia said she wished to attend one, and voilà, Monsieur Malfoy said he will make one for her," Fleur told him disapprovingly.

"It sounds like a great deal of trouble to me," Snape growled into his brandy snifter.

"We will make a weekend of it," Lucius continued, expanding on his theme. "I will invite a number of people to stay, and the others can Apparate or Portkey in for the ball. All of your young ladies and the young men of Phoenix House will be asked to stay — and Mademoiselle too, of course,"



Lucius added with a faintly mocking smile for Fleur.

A loud screech came from the game table, where Lupin was hugging Granger, under the disgruntled eye of Nymphadora Tonks, while Krum spoke softly to Skye, sympathizing with her over her loss. Potter was looking less than delighted as he scowled at Draco Malfoy, who was lounging on a love-seat, accepting the hand-feeding of assorted nibbles from the brazenly flaunted hand of Ginny Weasley.

Snape strolled over to the table, with Fleur close behind him.

"What does the winner of this Olympian feat receive?" he inquired sardonically.

Roger Davies and Lee Jordan simultaneously thrust their open hands at Potter and Krum, who good naturedly handed over the Galleon each had lost on the bet. Stormy was now hanging on her big sister, consoling her for her loss, while nearly shrieking her congratulations to the victorious Granger.

Granger released her hold around Lupin's neck and turned in his arms, so that she stood with her back to the werewolf's broad chest. She smiled sweetly at Tonks before giving Stormy a wink. "The winner receives the admiration of the spectators," she said playfully.

Fleur stood like a statue at Snape's side, her eyes focused malevolently on the champion. "No doubt she will receive



a great deal of unwarranted attention for succeeding at this silly Muggle children's game," she said maliciously.

All of the conversation stopped as eyes turned nervously to the veela-girl with a temper problem. Snape's mouth thinned in displeasure, but it was Stormy who saved Fleur from the immediate consequences of her actions.

"You just don't like it because *Hermione* gave it to me!" Stormy said loudly, not bothering to hide her contempt and dislike for her sister-to-be.

Into the shocked silence, Snape's voice snapped like a whip. "That was a foolish and insolent remark, Stormy. You may go to your room and go immediately to bed."

With her pinched little face flushed with confusion and mortification, Stormy fled up the stairs to the nursery, where she sought the counsel and consolation of her dolls and her Pygmy Puff.



For an embarrassed moment, no one spoke. At last, Davies stood and said he had to get home, just look at the time! Jordan was right behind him, and the boys of Phoenix House took their leave too, kissing hands and setting assignations with the young ladies as they were escorted down to the door.

Sophonria excused herself to Lucius and stood, moving toward the staircase. Snape stopped her as she reached



him. "Let me do it," he said quietly, looking up the darkened stairs after his little half-sister. "I was too harsh."

Sophonria placed a placating hand on his arm. "No, it was terribly rude of her, she needed to be reprimanded." She delivered a smile to Fleur. "She has been a bit difficult, ever since her father died. I'm very sorry."

Snape spoke. "I'm sure that Fleur understands, don't you, my dear?"

Fleur obeyed the command implicit in his voice. "Of course I do, Sophronia. Please do not waste another thought on it."

Snape then spoke to his stepmother. "Will you see Fleur to the door for me? I would not keep her waiting and I must speak with Stormy."

Sophonria gladly linked arms with Fleur and inexorably guided her to the stairs.

"...but I would not mind waiting, Severus," Fleur said plaintively.

"I do not know how long I will be. I will call on you tomorrow, Fleur. Good night."

Without a backward glance, Snape climbed the stairs until he reached the nursery floor.

Sitting on the rug in the dark, Stormy held Fletcher the Pygmy Puff to her heart as she cried. Entering her room purposefully, Snape disposed himself in the only chair in



the room, an ancient wooden rocker, and looked down upon her bowed head.

“I-I’m s-sorry,” she sobbed, her words muffled as she spoke them into the fur of the squirming Pygmy Puff.

Snape eyed the scrawny heap near his feet, seeing a blonde version of himself at that age, crying as he often did from the brutality he encountered in his daily life, as the only prisoner of war in the epic battle between his parents. His mother had died when he was ten years old; in later years, it had seemed to him that she had died of bitterness. When he was ten, though, all he knew was that he had lost his mum, and he had grieved her for years — grieved her still, if he were honest with himself.

His father had changed in those years that Severus had been in school at Hogwarts. The simmering rage had died down to a mere taciturnity of nature; by the time Sandoval Snape had met Sophronia Prewitt in the home of mutual friends, he had seen in her angelic beauty his own deliverance, and had petitioned her father for her hand. Sophronia, ever a dutiful daughter, had obeyed her father and married a man who was older than her own parents. Sandoval had not been a sweet or charming man, but he had loved his pretty young wife and the three daughters she had borne for him. He had become an indulgent husband and a fond parent, usually unable to deny his girls anything they desired.

On the very rare occasions when Severus was summoned to make an appearance, Sophronia had treated him with kindness and the girls had swarmed him like kittens, chattering at him in a way his students would never have dared to do. His students found him ugly and forbidding; his sisters found him to be in appearance and disposition just like their papa, and had expected from him the same deeply hidden affection and forbearance granted them by their shared parent.

In a quiet tone, he said, “You must learn to think before you speak, Stormy.” She sobbed more loudly, but he continued. “We have a duty to show proper respect to our family, you know, and also to behave appropriately in the company of guests. Your words not only hurt someone who is soon going to be part of your family, but you embarrassed all of our guests.”

Now the little body was quaking as she keened in her misery. Severus thought that if she were his student, he would call for Madam Pomfrey to give her a Calming Draught; as his sister, what was he to do? How had he ended up in this position of responsibility over the care and upbringing of this tiny soul? Consulting his highest authority, he thought, ‘What would Dumbledore do?’

Cautiously, he reached out one hand and placed it ever so lightly on the top of her head. There was a pause in her sob-

bing as she raised her face, seeing him with the moonlight pouring through the window and throwing his angular face into stark relief. She stared at him for a moment, before she hiccupped and said, “You look so much like Papa, Severus.”

In the next moment she hurled herself into his arms with a plaintive cry — “I miss him! I miss him!” — and she clung to him as if her heart were breaking.

Obedying instincts he did not know he possessed, Severus gathered the tiny body to him, feeling her hot tears falling on his neck as she cried into his shoulder; one arm held her safely nestled against his bony frame, and the other hand rhythmically stroked the silky blonde hair, as he murmured comforting words to her. Of their own accord, his feet set the chair in motion, and he rocked his baby sister until she quieted, though her fingers still clutched at his coat, as if releasing him would cause her to be carried off by a tidal wave. At last her grip loosened and her breathing deepened; still, the two of them rocked in their cocoon of safety, the skinny cherub in the arms of the gaunt ogre, the one assured of her salvation, the other convinced of his damnation.

THE YOUNG LADIES of Grimmauld Place were in the sitting room, poring excitedly over one of the new wedding magazines that had popped up, practically overnight, in the wake of the passing of the Marriage Act. At the centre of the excited gaggle were Cho Chang and Katie Bell, both of whom had accepted offers and had their engagements announced in the last week. The other girls stood behind the loveseat shared by the brides-to-be and gazed at the wedding finery.

“Oh, I like that one!” Luna Lovegood exclaimed, pointing over Cho’s shoulder at a quirky-looking wedding dress, something of a cross between the robe of an ancient Grecian priestess and the kaftan of a 1960’s Muggle hippie.

Hermione and Ginny exchanged tight-lipped,

amused looks over Luna's head as Cho diplomatically said, "That one would be perfect for you, Luna. Do you think Seamus would like it?"

Katie reached over and turned the page to look at the next picture. "Not Seamus, silly — Draco."

Skye, seeing the look of discomfort on Luna's face, reached over Katie's shoulder and ran her finger down the belled skirt of another simpering model. "That one is really old-fashioned looking," she said softly. "It looks like something from a storybook."

The model, prodded by Cho's finger, turned so the girls could see the back of the dress. Alicia Spinnet sat down on Katie's other side and smiled over her shoulder at Skye. "Harry would love you in that," she said. "Of course, Harry would love you in anything — he acts as if he's forgotten how to talk every time he sees you."

Professor McGonagall poked her head into the room. "All right, girls, all of you who wish to come along to Madam Malkin's had best get your things — we're leaving directly!"

The newly engaged girls leapt up and hurried off to get ready to go shopping for wedding robes, chattering with their friends as they went.



Bill Weasley closed the door of his flat behind him and



escaped onto the street in Diagon Alley with a sigh of relief.

It was not that he disliked Percy; it was just that he had lived away from home for so long that he had forgotten what a sanctimoniously boring little berk Perce could be.

Bill had left England for a time, soon after his break-up with Fleur Delacour, and gone on assignment to work in Egypt on behalf of his employer, Gringotts Wizarding Bank. Percy Weasley had been appointed to the recently enlarged Diplomatic Corps within the Ministry of Magic, and was just returned from his latest post at the Salem Witches' Institute in America, where he had served as a junior British liaison. Both young men had recently returned to England, each on leaves of absence from their jobs so that they might do their duty and find wives.

Bill's first stop after leaving Egypt was the Burrow, to allow his mum to fuss over and feed him. What he had not planned on was finding Percy sitting on the other side of the dinner table, that first night.

"But it's just perfect!" Molly Weasley had exclaimed. "Percy let his flat go when he left for America, but you've kept yours, Bill — Percy can stay with you in London so that you can go to the parties together, and be company for one another!"

Bill's father had given him a sympathetic look, but no support, so Bill now found himself escaping from his own



home for a bit of relief from his brother. His mum was unpacking Percy's things and helping him get settled in the flat; Bill announced his need for some basic supplies from the shops and thankfully slipped out into the street.

His rooms were located in one of the four buildings on Diagon Alley given over to rental flats. Each of the buildings blended perfectly into the background of the Wizarding shopping district, though each was magically augmented within, so that far more units than one might imagine were available to let. There was nothing special about his three-room flat, other than the fact that he did not have to share it with six siblings.

Dear Merlin, how he was dreading the next five months. He was still smarting from his near-miss with Fleur Delacour, if the truth were known. He had fallen for her face and her figure, and then had become disastrously intimate with her temper. His desire for her was overshadowed by the revulsion he experienced when he saw her in full-fishwife mode. It was a blow to him, having to give up the dream of having such a dazzling wife. In the normal course of things, he would have had time to get over his disappointment before naturally entering the dating world again. But now, he was forced to wife shop long before he was ready. His contemporaries were fortunate, when compared to him; they had only to fear the Office of



Last Resort — Bill had to find himself a wife before Molly Weasley did it for him.

Bill began his desultory stroll down Diagon Alley, pausing to peer into windows as he went. Here was Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions; she had recently expanded her shop to include a separate section just for wedding robes and accessories. He was gazing, a bit non-plussed, at the sappy look on the face of the "groom" on one knee before the "bride" in the advert in the window of the wedding shop, when he saw the sight that momentarily deprived him of breath.

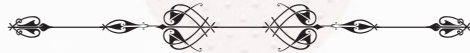
His vantage point on the sidewalk allowed him to see the dais before the huge triple mirror that dominated the middle of the shop. Standing on that dais, admiring herself in the glass, was the most exquisite girl he had ever seen. Oh, yes, he had a weakness for beauty in a woman — how else would he have ended up with a cold fish like Fleur Delacour? — but this piece of perfection put Fleur's austere beauty firmly in the shade. The angel before him had shining golden hair, a cupid's bow of a mouth, and the sweetest expression on her lovely face. Seeing her with the traditional wedding wreath in her hair, his heart lurched within his chest. Who was the lucky sod who would marry this girl? Why hadn't he met her first?

Bill's mouth-gaping admiration was interrupted as his



angel was joined at the mirror by a bevy of other girls, most of whom Bill recognized as members of the Order of the Phoenix. Quickly, he stepped back from the window, not wishing to be seen by the young women. Now he was *really* curious. If the goddess in the wedding wreath was an intimate of all those other girls, why had he never seen her before? How could the bloody fates be so cruel?

Shaking himself from his reverie, Bill turned around and walked back to his flat, completely forgetting to go to the shops for bread and milk.



Ginny was delighted when her mum Flooed that she was bringing her brothers over to visit, even if it meant she was to miss out on the Diagon Alley trip.

Ginny greeted her family members effusively and got them settled in the sitting room with tea and cakes.

“Well, it is only to be expected in these times,” Molly Weasley said, replacing her teacup in its saucer. “The married men will just have to take up the slack for a time while the bachelors get themselves settled. Employers are being quite understanding about it, really.”

Bill sat next to Ginny on the sofa, one long leg crossed over the other, his golden fang earring dangling beneath his long red hair. “Except, of course, for the men who work for them-



selves; they just have to put in overtime looking for wives.”

Ginny snorted and punched him in the arm. “Stop it; you’re making me breathe tea!”

Molly sent an admonishing glance Bill’s way. “Just look at Fred and George! They run their own business, but they were able to take time out to court *their* ladies.” Molly looked a bit smug. “That’s half of you lot sorted out; now I just have to find someone for Bill, Percy, and Ronald.”

Ginny set her teacup down on the tea tray with a china-rattling clatter. “What about *me*, Mum?” she demanded hotly.

Molly pinned her daughter with a quelling look. “You, young lady, have another full year of school before you have to settle down. We’ll be looking for someone for you this time, next summer.”

Ginny had opened her mouth to argue when Percy spoke up. “Gin, where’s Hermione? Mum said she’s staying here with you?”

“She’s upstairs, I think, Percy. Why?”

Percy pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose and flicked an invisible piece of lint from the sleeve of his conservatively tailored robes. “I just wanted to say hello. One would not wish to be backwards in any proper attention one should pay to one’s friends.”

The sound of an arrival from downstairs distracted them for a moment; presently, Tonks came into the room.



"Winky said you were here! Welcome back!"

Though Tonks' words applied to both of the Weasley brothers currently in the room, she spoke only to Bill, who stood upon her entrance and laughingly received her hug.

"Thanks, Tonks. It's good to be home again."

Bill gave Tonks' shoulder a friendly squeeze before he resumed his seat next to Ginny; Molly watched this exchange with a speculative expression. Percy cleared his throat.

"Hello, Nymphadora. It is good to see you looking well! You're engaged to Remus Lupin, if I remember correctly." Percy, with all the perspicacity that had earned him such accolades in the Diplomatic Corps, completely failed to see the head-shakings of his family members. "When is the happy day?"

Tonks took a chair and looked Percy up and down as if he were a giraffe that had wandered into the parlour.

"You know, Perce, I still hate being called 'Nymphadora.'" Turning her shoulder resolutely to his affronted face, Tonks addressed Molly. "What's this I hear about Charlie?"

"He's engaged to a Romanian girl! Her name is Draguta Cristescu; she's a dragon-keeper-in-training." Molly reached into her handbag and pulled out a calendar. "They will be married in November in Romania."

"And the twins are marrying the Patil girls?" Tonks continued.

"A double wedding in October," Molly said, flipping



the calendar pages.

"Molly, you are going to be one busy witch," Tonks said, slanting a smile at Ginny, who rolled her eyes.

"Yes, Tonks, I have quite a bit to do — and I am going to need cooperation if I'm to get it all done on time." She glared at her two sons, who managed to be looking elsewhere as she said this.

There was a rustle in the doorway. "Good morning, Ginny. May we meet your mother?"

Sophronia Snape stood in the doorway with Stormy. Ginny hopped up and went to take Sophronia's hand and lead her in to Molly.

"Mum, this is Sophronia Snape, Professor Snape's stepmother. And this is her youngest daughter, Stormy."

Molly shook Sophronia's hand and smiled at Stormy. "You're a Prewett too, aren't you?" she inquired of Sophronia.

"Our family is part of the Wiltshire branch," Sophronia agreed softly. "I think you left school the same year I began, so we missed one another at Hogwarts."

Ginny introduced her brothers, and Sophronia sat down next to Molly, while Stormy sidled up close to Bill.

"You look more like Ron than you do Fred," she said conversationally.

Bill smiled at the little girl in a way that disturbed the peace of most older females. "Now, Miss Snape, surely you think I'm



more handsome than either of those two?" he teased.

Percy interrupted. "Ginny, perhaps you could invite Hermione down to join us for a cup of tea?"

Stormy spoke up then. "Hermione went to Diagon Alley to shop for wedding robes," she explained.

"What?"

Percy spoke so sharply that all eyes in the room were focused on him.

Sophronia interceded quietly at this point. "Stormy meant to say that Hermione went shopping with Katie and Cho, who are buying their wedding robes."

Molly said, "Who are they going to marry?" She smiled at Sophronia. "I keep thinking I have my hands full trying to marry off six sons in six months, but you have all of the Order girls, as well as your own daughters and yourself! That is a much harder job than mine."

Sophronia smiled her gentle smile. "Cho is going to marry Roger Davies and Katie has accepted an offer from Eddie Carmichael."

The doorbell chimed again; Stormy raced to the top of the stairs to see who had arrived, and her joyfully squealed greeting was clearly heard in the sitting room.

"It looks like your missing child has been found, Mum," Bill said with a smile.

Harry and Ron came into the room, each holding one

of Stormy's hands. Molly turned on her youngest son with a trace of indignation.

"I suppose you know I came to see you at Phoenix House this morning!" she exclaimed, accepting Ron's salute to her cheek before smiling at Harry.

"Professor Lupin told us you'd been by, Mum," Ron said, receiving Bill's punch on the shoulder and nodding indifferently to Percy. "Sorry, but Harry and I were in the Park having a pick up game with the Ravenclaw blokes."

Molly bristled. "You have far more important things to do than muck about on the Quidditch pitch," she declared.

Ron rolled his eyes. "We're at parties six nights out of seven, Mum. What else do you want? We're trying."

"I've made a list for each of you," she said, reaching into her handbag for a roll of parchment.

"Mum, no!" Ginny blurted. Even Bill and Ron looked horrified.

Molly turned on her daughter. "You're not ON this list, missy," she said. "You're too young, so just mind your own business."

Harry caught Ginny's eye and suddenly both of them were afflicted with coughing fits to cover up the shared laughter that flowed between them at their affectionate exasperation with Molly.

"May I see my list, please?" Percy said, holding out his hand.

Molly used her wand to separate the three lists on the page of parchment and handed the middle section to Percy. "You see?" she said, looking severely from Ron to Bill. "*Percy is willing to cooperate with me!*"

Bill wisely kept his eyes on his teacup, but his youngest brother was unable to keep his mouth shut. "I don't need your list, Mum! I can find someone on my own!"

Molly turned her penetrating gaze on Ron. "Can you? Pray tell me who is on your list, Ronald. Just the top three will be fine."

Now Harry and Ginny exchanged an agonized look as Ron's mouth fell open, and he closed and opened it again a few times, as if he were a fish. Oddly enough, it was Percy who rescued Ron from the embarrassment of having to name names.

"Mother, I don't see Hermione Granger on this list," Percy said, frowning at the parchment.

Though Sophronia was much too well-bred to stare, it could fairly be said that every other eye in the room was now fixed on Percy with fascination.

"Well, no," Molly said, consulting her master list. "Hermione is on Ron's list, Percy."

Ron began again to speak, but this time Ginny was able to catch his eye and fiercely shake her head before he could say a word.

Percy sniffed. "Hermione has far too much sense to

consider marrying Ron," he said with an air of certainty.

Tonks entered the fray. "You think she might have the kind of sense it takes to marry you, Perce?"

Percy, who took himself so seriously at all times that he was virtually immune to insult, looked at Tonks and responded, "Hermione is a girl of exceptional intelligence. I cannot imagine another young lady of my acquaintance who would make a more exemplary wife for a career diplomat."

Tonks nodded with mock solemnity. "I wish I could be there when you tell her so, Percy."

Harry, Ron, and Ginny were now in sore straits, doing their best not to bring the wrath of Molly down upon themselves by laughing aloud, but Tonks was really pushing them to their limits; even Bill seemed to be struggling not to laugh in Percy's face.

Percy, however, responded in a perfectly serious tone. "She will no doubt be flattered, Tonks. Hermione is a modest girl, and is somewhat shy — it will not have occurred to her that I have realized in the last few months that I have a decided preference for her."

Ginny, who had, with a super-human effort, repressed her giggles, now spoke to her preposterous, deluded brother. "Percy, would you like for me to tell her for you? Feel her out, see what she thinks of the notion?"

"Soften the blow, more like," Ron muttered, just loudly

enough for Harry and Tonks to hear him.

Stormy stood next to Bill, looking from Ginny to Tonks to Ron and Harry. "What is the joke?" she inquired, wanting to be let in on what was making her older friends want to laugh so much.

Molly was a devoted mother, but she could recognize the signs amongst the other young people, and she realized that Percy was exposing himself to the ridicule of his siblings. "Well, Percy, that is something you will want to speak with Hermione about, isn't it? She may already have someone," she added, with an inquisitive look at Sophronia.

"Hermione has not taken me into her confidence," Sophronia said quietly. "She has a number of visitors, and is never without a partner at the dances."

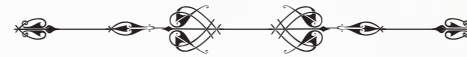
Percy identified Sophronia as a person with proper consideration for important matters. "Is there a Ministry function this evening, ma'am? One that Hermione will be attending?"

"There is the dedication of the new annex of the National Wizarding Museum tonight," Sophronia answered. "Many of our young ladies will be attending, though I cannot speak for Hermione."

Molly decided to bring the tea party to an end, before the younger ones could humiliate Percy with their obviously derogatory opinions of his chances to gain the



affections of Hermione Granger.

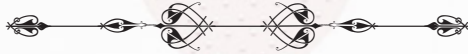


Snape and McGonagall chaperoned their charges to the museum dedication after supper that evening. It should have been a quiet affair, with fewer than one hundred attendees, but as with every other opportunity these days, an orchestra and a caterer had been brought in, so that a cocktail party-cum-informal dance would take place in and about the new annex.

Sophronia did not accompany them this evening; Snape had left her sitting in the parlour with Lucius Malfoy, who had managed to manufacture a minimum of one excuse every day to appear at Grimmauld Place and to beg Sophronia's assistance with some niggling detail or other concerning the formal ball to be given at Malfoy Manor. Snape was torn; Lucius Malfoy had been a friend of his for nearly thirty years, but he was not at all sure that he wanted to see him as the stepfather of his sisters — nor as the potential biological father to further siblings. Sophronia and her chosen husband might provide the three girls. There was a streak of ruthlessness in Lucius that Snape admired in a friend — and that he expected in a Slytherin — but he was not certain that it would make a good attribute for Sophronia's next husband.



After patrolling the four corners of the annex and satisfying himself that there were no security risks, he found a chair at a small table at the end of the room farthest from the orchestra, and sat down to nurse his threatening migraine. He had hoped, with the end of the war that the reduction in his personal stress levels would relieve him of the severe headaches that had plagued him for so long, but it now appeared that his hope was yet another vain wish he could add to his catalogue of things that would never come true for him.



Sophronia saw Lucius to the door, graciously accepting the kiss he pressed to her hand, then climbed the stairs to check on the girls and make sure they were in bed. In the nursery, she found Stormy slumbering in the midst of her dolls. Pausing only to tuck Stormy's blanket about her more securely, Sophronia proceeded to the room that Shadow shared with Skye.

From outside the room, she could hear the unmistakable sounds of weeping. For a moment, she closed her eyes and dreaded the conversation to come; she knew very well why Shadow was crying, and it wrenched her heart to see her child in such distress. She knew where her duty lay, however, and she took a deep breath and entered the darkened



room, where Shadow sat on the cushioned window seat, her eyes gazing unseeingly out at the dark summer night.

Sophronia crossed the room and placed a loving hand on Shadow's shoulder. "Don't cry, precious," she said, pulling her handkerchief from the pocket of her robes and reaching out to blot tears from her daughter's face.

Shadow hiccupped and drew a shuddering breath. "I can't help it, Mama," she said. "I love him — you know I do."

Sophronia sighed and seated herself on the window seat cushion, stroking one hand down Shadow's long, honeyed hair.

"I know you believe you love him, darling. But you are only sixteen, and you will find yourself falling in and out of love a few more times before you choose the boy you'll marry."

"I will never love anyone else. And neither will he!" Shadow's tear-stained face turned entreatingly to her mother. "His mum gave him a *list* today! A LIST! He's supposed to choose some girl from the list, Mama! And I'm not on it!"

Shadow then flung herself into her mother's arms, and had her cry, while Sophronia stroked her hair and promised her that she would get over him, that she would love someone else, and one day would look back and be thankful that she had not married Ronald Weasley when she was only sixteen years old.

Sophronia made sure her exhausted daughter was safely tucked up for sleep before she ascended the stairs



to her own bedchamber. Was she lying to the child? She certainly did not mean to do so. But she could not help recalling that dark-haired boy who had captured her fancy when she was about Shadow's age. He had been in and out of her life for a few years, like a bee buzzing from flower to flower and back again — but he had always been at the back of her mind. Even after she had married Mr. Snape and learned to be a happy wife and mother, that dark-haired bad boy had continued to haunt her dreams.

Did she want that for Shadow? To live in some half-remembered eternal regret for the path not taken? Giving herself a mental shake, Sophronia prepared herself for bed. It was of no matter, really; Severus would never consent to Shadow promising herself at such a young age, and under Wizarding law, it would require the consent of both guardians for such a contract to be made for a child of her age.



Harry danced the second dance of the night with Skye; he had been unable to procure her hand for the first dance because Viktor Krum was there before him. Now it was the third dance, and Harry was sitting in a chair against the wall as Viktor danced with Skye again. Harry liked Viktor a lot, but lately it seemed as if the Bulgarian had been causing nothing but grief for the people Harry cared about. What



had he meant by that public kiss with Tonks at the picnic? Professor Lupin had actually retracted his marriage offer after that incident, and it had seemed to Harry that Tonks and Professor Lupin were meant for each other. Harry knew Sirius well enough to know that *he* wasn't serious about Tonks, not even when he was escorting her to every party in town. Harry loved his godfather, but he hoped he never acted like that around women — Sirius seemed like a different bloke when he was wooing and paying court to all the women he met. And surely Professor Lupin wasn't really pursuing Hermione now? Harry was pretty sure that Hermione would end up leading Professor Lupin around like a tame wolf on a leash — why would Hermione *want* to be with someone she could order around like that? She was holding herself in check pretty well right now, but Harry and Ron were both agreed that the first time she got upset about something, it would blindside Professor Lupin, and he would not have a clue how to handle her, when that happened.

Harry's train of thought was interrupted as he saw Luna Lovegood dance by in the arms of Draco Malfoy. The look on Luna's face caused Harry to do a double take. Yes, she had her cheek pressed to Draco's shoulder as if she were lost in a happy dream — and Draco was looking down at her with an expression that Harry could only interpret as tenderness. What was Draco doing looking at Luna like



that? Craning his neck, Harry looked about the room, searching for Ginny. Draco had been wooing Ginny for weeks! How could he throw Ginny over for *Luna*? Harry was fond of Luna, but as a girl friend — no, as a *wife*, he corrected himself — Luna couldn't hold a candle to Gin!

Harry left his seat and began to prowl the room, looking for Ginny. The dance came to an end, and he saw Seamus Finnegan claim Skye for the next number, while Viktor strolled out into the museum forecourt. He saw Ron, drinking glass after glass of punch and mooning about at one of the tables, boring anyone who came within speaking distance with his views on the age restrictions in the Marriage Law. He saw Hermione, continuing to dodge the persistent attentions of Percy Weasley, happily accepting invitations to dance from anyone who asked, just to keep distance between herself and Percy. Then he saw Fleur Delacour, entering the annex room and making a beeline for the spot where Professor Snape sat, pinching the bridge of his nose between his closed eyes, and utterly oblivious to Fleur's advance. Just to be on the safe side, though Fleur seldom seemed to notice him unless he was with Skye, Harry slipped through a knot of people and out into the forecourt.



Fleur stopped before she reached the table where



Severus sat alone and observed him with calculating eyes. He was oblivious to her presence, with his own eyes closed as he massaged his temples. Undoubtedly, he was suffering from one of his headaches again. Fleur believed that she knew an excellent way to dispel the headache pain, but her betrothed had shown not the least sign of interest in availing himself of her charms before their wedding day.

She turned her glance then to Hermione Granger, who was dancing a slow number in the arms of Sirius Black. Fleur might not be the intellectual equal of Hermione Granger, but she knew when she had been challenged. Granger's little remark about "what wizard might desire me" had not failed to find its mark with the intended victim. Fleur was no slouch in the art of scenting out potential rivals where her man was concerned and in doing what she could to disarm those rivals.

Another alternative was to make her man oblivious to other women. To get his attention focused so intently on her that she would *have* no rival.

Perhaps it was time for her to take matters into her own capable hands.



The sight that Harry's eyes when he stepped out onto the forecourt struck him with a force of emotion that was



as violent as it was unexpected. Ginny sat atop the terrace wall, her face lifted and her eyes closed, as Viktor Krum leaned ever-closer to her, his gaze intent upon her face.

“Ginny!” Harry blurted, stepping forward aggressively.

Ginny startled and looked over at him, an odd expression on her face. “Hi, Harry,” she said.

“Come on,” he commanded, halting beside her and holding out his hand.

Viktor slanted a look of amusement at Harry, obediently stepping away from Ginny so that she could jump down from the wall.

“What?” she demanded petulantly, preparing to fire up for a row.

Harry ignored her tone and grabbed her hand, tugging her back toward the interior of the museum annex. “You promised this dance to me,” he said.

Ginny dug in her heels, jerking her hand away from him. “I did not!” she said.

Harry turned to face her, trying to figure out how to get her back inside, away from Krum. Viktor chose that moment to stroll back toward the door, saying quietly to Harry, as he passed, “You can hear the music out here, too.”

Grateful for the tip, though suspicious of the reason for it, Harry stepped up to Ginny, and wrapped his arm about her waist, deftly capturing her hand. “This is one

of your favourite songs, Gin,” he said coaxingly, gently urging her to dance.

“Oh, all right,” Ginny said, unable to resist Harry once he began to coax her. They started to dance, and she looked up into his eyes.

“What were you doing out here, alone in the dark with Viktor?” he said, trying to infuse the question with big-brotherly concern.

“I came out to look at the stars,” she informed him. Puzzling for a moment over his words, she nearly stumbled as it dawned on her that Harry’s reaction was due to jealousy. “Viktor wandered out here, and was talking to me, and he noticed an eyelash on my cheek. He was just about to remove it when you came barrelling out here.”

Harry stopped dancing and reached for Ginny’s chin, angling so that the moonlight shone on her cheeks.

“What are you doing?” she whispered as her eyelids fluttered closed.

“I don’t see an eyelash,” he whispered back, struggling with these overwhelming feelings which had come upon him out of nowhere when he saw Viktor hovering over Ginny’s lips — lips now just inches from his own. She stood willingly, compliantly, in the circle of his arms, and trustingly closed her eyes as she lifted her face to him — dear Merlin how he wanted to kiss her! But he had been pursuing Skye,

he had kissed Skye, he had no business kissing Ginny —
And neither did anyone else, by God.

Then Ginny took the decision away from him. When she opened her eyes and saw the way he was looking at her, she did the only reasonable thing — she pulled his face down to hers for a kiss.

Harry was not a greatly experienced kisser; he had shared a bit of snogging with Cho, and the odd snog here and there with other girls at parties when they played Postman's Knock. His few kisses with Skye had been chaste, closed-mouth encounters, marked by reserve on her part and reverence on his.

This was different.

Ginny's lips, as she captured his mouth, were soft and mobile beneath his own. She actually sucked unhurriedly at his lower lip and gnawed it gently with her little teeth. He opened his mouth and her tongue moved against the lip she had bitten. When that happened, his tongue darted into her mouth and her hands crept into his hair. The kiss seemed to go on and on as they explored one another's mouths; it was as if the world outside the perimeter of their embrace had ceased to exist. At last, with a soft laugh, Ginny ended the kiss and buried her suddenly burning face in Harry's neck. He began to step back from her, fairly horrified at what he done, but she would not let him go. She wrapped her arms

about his waist and pressed her cheek to his shoulder, gazing up into his face with unfocused eyes and rousing bruised lips.

"You promised me a dance," she murmured.

They spent the remainder of the night dancing on the terrace, until Hermione called them in to leave.

SNAPE SAT with his fiancée in the sitting room at Grimmauld Place, his patience thrumming like the string of bow too tightly pulled. Fleur had unwittingly done herself damage in his eyes on the night of the Pick-Up Stix debacle, when she had spoken with such venomous derision to Miss Granger. Snape viewed his sisters and his charges at Grimmauld Place as children over whom it was his duty to watch; he did not consider them to be his contemporaries. To see his affianced wife engaged in battle with Granger put him in mind of the fact that Fleur was far more a member of their age group than of his, and this disturbed him. He had been telling himself for months that to marry a girl

no older than his sister, Skye, was foolish in the extreme, yet here was a concrete reminder of how few years separated Fleur from Skye — or Granger, for that matter.

He was also quite unhappy with Fleur's show of temper to Stormy; though he had not witnessed the incident, it had been related to him separately by both Skye and Shadow. Snape had a nasty temper himself and he was not a proponent of disproportionate courtesy in any situation — except when dealing with his sisters. Though he was incapable of identifying as affection the emotion he felt towards Sophronia's daughters, he was easily able to recognize that his territorial instincts were thoroughly aroused by the three girls who shared with him the anomaly of the Snape bump.

Fleur continued prattling to him about the arrangements for their wedding, planned for September and approaching more quickly than Snape liked to remember. He was tuning her out quite efficiently when she caught his attention with a repeated mention of Granger's name.

"...for he is an estimable young man, do you not think? He would be an excellent match for her; they are both very intelligent."

Snape raised a sardonic eyebrow. "Of which estimable young man are we speaking?"

"Why, Percy Weasley, Severus, have you not been attend-

ing to me?" Fleur pouted at him prettily.

Snape seemed not to notice. "And he has expressed an interest in the Granger girl?"

Fleur's eyes narrowed dangerously. "He has been here to see her every day, though she frequently avoids him. He is quite particular in his attentions."

A Weasley courting Granger? What could be better?

Fleur chose this moment to move a bit closer to him on the settee, her silvery hair adhering to the black wool of his coat as she leaned up to whisper in his ear. "Very soon we will be married, darling. I can hardly wait." The last words were only breathed, as her lips made contact with the skin just beneath his ear. Then she was speaking again, so softly the words were barely discernible. "We don't *have* to wait, Severus."

Snape went completely still when Fleur pressed herself against him; he could smell the scent she favoured, redolent of some heavily perfumed flower. He could feel her breasts, deliberately thrust against his chest. He was dimly aware that a beautiful, therefore theoretically *desirable* young woman, who would soon be in his possession, was making advances upon his person, and certain parts of him were acutely aware of the availability she was advertising to him. Even so, when he felt her warm breath on his ear, he could not prevent the wave of dis-

taste which passed over him.

At that moment, Winky bowed her way into the room followed by Val Delacour, and Snape was on his feet in an instant, all thought of Fleur's behaviour vanquished from his mind. The look that he directed at the younger wizard had frightened many men more courageous than Fleur's invertebrate of a brother.

"Mère sent me to fetch you, Fleur," Val said, keeping a wary eye on Snape.

Fleur was understandably annoyed. Trying to spark her icy fiancé to passion was going to be tough work, and Fleur was not accustomed to having to work to win the ardent admiration of men. Tossing her hair, she stood from the settee and made a production of straightening her robes, as if she had been fighting for her virtue when her brother interrupted them.

Had he any attention to spare for her indignation, Snape might have been amused by Fleur's play-acting; as it was, the full force of his notice was upon Val Delacour.

"I just came up to get Fleur," Val muttered, carefully not making eye contact with Snape.

Snape stepped closer to Val, startling the young man into scrambling backwards, into the corridor. Snape pursued him, his hands disposed negligently in his trousers pockets. Their progress out of the room had taken them out of Fleur's hearing; Snape said menacingly, "I think the

house-elf could have carried the message up, do you not?"

At Val's frightened nod, he said, "Then next time you will not enter this house."

He did not stay to see Val's agreement; he turned to take his fiancée's hand, and to press a rather intimate kiss to her inner wrist, as if in atonement for his previous lack of response.

"I will see you at Malfoy Manor, my dear," he said, leading her down the stairway in the wake of her brother, who scuttled out the front door as if he were pursued by the hounds of hell.

Fleur was emboldened to stand on her tiptoes in the doorway and to press a kiss to his cheek. "I will look forward to going away with you," she purred in a tone full of promise.



Lucius Malfoy walked into the room which had been prepared for Sophronia Snape and surveyed it critically. The vanity, the writing desk, and the bedside table each bore a crystal vase, tastefully arranged with white roses. The carpet on the floor had been charmed to the colour of summer bluebells, and it perfectly matched the paint on the walls, the upholstery of the furniture, and the duvet on the bed. His rather calculating grey eyes stopped on the elaborately carved headboard of the bed, contemplating the nymphs and dryads cavorting there. He con-

sidered for a moment the probable outcome of an attempt to join the Widow Snape in this bed. Lucius meant to win the gentle Sophronia for his wife; he was confident that, given the opportunity to make love to her, he could enthrall her completely. If, however, she took exception to his seduction attempt, it would be a setback of considerable proportions for his plans. As much as he wanted to possess Sophronia, he was perfectly prepared to wait to bed her until she was legally bound to him.

He exited the guest bedroom and strode off to inspect the drawing room. The majority of his acquaintance would be astonished to see the drawling, lounging elder Malfoy moving with such energy. Those people had not, however, seen him when he was executing a campaign of strategy.



Hermione crept quietly down from the second floor landing and peeked over the bannister. She had witnessed from above the sensual kiss to Fleur's wrist; now she saw how complaisantly the professor received the Frenchwoman's salute to his gaunt cheek.

Her brow furrowed as her mind began to turn over the meaning of the scene she had witnessed. She was chewing on her lip and climbing back up to her room when she was hailed from below.



"Miss Granger?"

Hermione turned. "Yes, sir?"

"May I speak with you, please?"

Hermione descended the stairway to the corridor, then went into the sitting room, taking a seat upon the settee lately vacated by the professor and his inamorata.

Snape followed her into the room, a frown appearing between his brows as the girl sat down where Fleur had lately been — had lately been pressing herself up to him like a wanton, a part of him whispered. Shaking his head to rid it of the seditious voice, he said, "I wish to thank you for your kind attention to Stormy. She told me it was you who procured that game for her, which she enjoys so much. We are much obliged to you."

"Pooh," Hermione said, with a friendly wave of her hand. "I like Stormy quite for her *own* sake; she and I are good friends. Anything I have done has been for that reason — not to please —"

You, Snape clearly heard.

"...anyone else," Hermione finished.

Somewhat taken aback by this statement, Snape found himself ignoring his previous resolution to thank the impossible chit without falling into an argument with her, and his evil genius prompted him to say, "You may be her friend, but you would do better not to let her, or



any of my sisters, hear you say that Miss Delacour has a temper like a vixen!"

"But, Professor! I know that Miss Delacour cannot help her temper — for if she could, surely she would exercise some control over it — and I have always pointed that out to your sisters!"

Snape took a menacing step toward Hermione. "I consider Miss Delacour to be a sweet-tempered woman."

"But I meant a particularly sweet-tempered vixen, sir. Truly!"

"What you *meant*, Miss Granger, is to disparage my fiancée!"

"No, honestly! I am very fond of foxes, and particularly of vixen!" Hermione assured him earnestly.

He was standing over her now with his fists clenched. "Stormy, however, is not partial to foxes, and —" the absurdity of continuing this line of discussion occurred to him and he stopped speaking.

"I'm sure she will be, when she has lived in the same house with Miss Delacour for a month or two," Hermione told him encouragingly, darting a glance at his furious face from beneath her lashes.

Turning on his heel, he walked out of the room and down the stairs, away from his tormentor.

It was the laughter floating down from above that incensed him.

At the foot of the stairs he ran into Percy Weasley, who had just been admitted by Winky. Seeing how he might be a bit revenged upon Miss Granger, Snape greeted Percy with uncharacteristic cordiality.

"Do you mean to attend the ball at the Malfoy estate?" he inquired.

"Certainly!" Percy enthused. "I would not miss it for the world."

Snape nodded. "Then you have come to secure Miss Granger's hand for the first dance. An excellent scheme; I'm sure that she will be overrun with invitations. You'll find her upstairs in the sitting room."

And with a tiny, malicious smile upon his thin lips, Snape swept out of the house, heading for the quiet of his club.

Percy stood straight, glancing in the mirror to make sure that his appearance was orderly, and went up the stairs to claim the hand of his chosen lady for the prestigious first dance of the most prominent social event of the season.

"I'm sorry Percy, I'm already engaged for the first dance," she presently told him in an apologetic tone, knowing that one or another of her friends would come to her rescue.

Percy looked somewhat offended. "But how can that be? When Professor Snape urged me to hurry to be the first to ask you!"

"Professor Snape?" Hermione said appreciatively, her

spirits lightening. "Did he really? Well, he obviously did not know I was already promised. Perhaps we could dance another dance together at the ball."

Percy was obliged to be content with this morsel. He then sat down and bored Hermione for thirty minutes with a long and tedious explanation of his exact situation and duties on behalf of the Ministry of Magic at the Salem Witch's Institute, in America. Hermione gave the appearance of listening attentively to Percy's discourse; in reality, however, she was acknowledging to herself the escalation of hostilities, and pondering how best to counter the upping of the ante.

Her memory stirred, and presented her with an appropriate plan of action.



Hermione stood before the looking glass in her bedroom at Grimmauld Place, staring at her reflection with an expression akin to wonder.

"Ma'am," she said softly as she stared, "are you sure?"

Minerva McGonagall stood and twitched the skirt of the ball gown into place, pinching a tiny pleat between her fingers.

"It is not as if I were going to wear it again myself, Miss Granger," she said briskly. She tugged at the seam where the



bodice met the full skirt. "We'll need to let out the bust a bit," she murmured. "You have more on top than I ever did."

Hermione pirouetted, noting how the fabric of the gown swirled and shimmered with her movement. The shade was as intense as a jewel tone, though no jewel of that hue appeared in nature. It was the colour of flame, a hot coral; just one shade to the orange side of scarlet.

"Please tell me about faerie silk," Hermione said, captivated.

McGonagall gazed into the mirror from behind the younger witch, almost as if she were seeing a memory of other days.

"Faerie silk was very rare in my youth, even though one could still obtain the fabric, then. It was used mostly for items of clothing. It was far too dear to use for upholstery or draperies, though I did once see a honeymoon cottage with bed hangings of silver faerie silk." A reminiscent smile tugged at her stern mouth. "I can imagine that some truly inspired marriages were consummated there."

Hermione could scarcely have been more shocked than to hear her dry-as-dust, spinsterish teacher speak of marriage consummation in such a dreamy tone.

"The silk came from worm farms cultivated and tended by faeries. When it was harvested, it was stored in crystalline caves until the next full moon, when it was spun by faerie



spinners on enchanted wheels, then woven in the dark of the moon. The fabric was used for evening gowns, negligees, fancy undergarments, things of that nature. In olden times, witches carried handkerchiefs woven of faerie silk and their wizard cavaliers would wear the handkerchiefs as tokens of their ladies' favour during ceremonial duelling tournaments. The men also carried the tokens into battle as a reminder of those things for which they fought..."

Hermione's eyes were now riveted on the older woman's face as she spun her faerie tale. "What became of the faerie silk, ma'am? Why is it no longer used?"

McGonagall's eyes came back to Hermione's. "The allies of Grindelwald destroyed all of the faerie silk farms they could find during that war. The faerie magic was perceived by the Dark forces as a threat; it was too good, too pure, for the Dark to bear." A shadow crossed Minerva's face and suddenly she returned to her armchair and sagged into it. "After that, faerie silk became unheard of in Britain."

The door into Hermione's room cracked open and she could see her friends in the corridor. "Come on in," she invited, turning to face them as they spilled into the room. "Isn't it lovely?"

Tonks, Luna, Ginny, and all three of the Snape sisters approached with looks of reverent admiration in their faces.

"I've only seen a dress like this in a picture book, and it

did not do justice to how beautiful it is," Ginny breathed as she rubbed the ethereal fabric between her fingers.

Shadow glanced at Skye. "Remember the story Mum used to tell us about the princess in the faerie silk gown?"

"I know that one!" Tonks said. "If a girl who is wearing a faerie silk gown dances with her one true love..."

"They will know their hearts' desire!" the Snape sisters finished with her.

"Oh, *really* girls," Professor McGonagall said tartly. "What arrant nonsense!"

Stormy turned her limpid blue eyes to the face of the frightening old lady and went forward to tuck her little hand confidently into that of Minerva McGonagall. "But it could be true, couldn't it, Auntie Min?"

McGonagall's former students watched this masterful wheedling of the strictest Head of House at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry with respect and mild indignation. Skye and Shadow, however, were much too used to their baby sister's cozening ways to be surprised.

McGonagall, rather than reprimanding the little imp for such a familiar form of address, stroked one gnarled hand over the corn-silk-fine hair and said, "I suppose anything is possible, Stormy. I do not think it is a good idea, however, to place too much hope in legends and old wives' tales."

McGonagall stood from her armchair, keeping Stormy's

hand and beginning to lead her from the room. “We had all best begin our packing if we’re going to Malfoy Manor for the weekend! Miss Granger, I’m sure that Sophronia will see to the alterations of that gown in two shakes. She is upstairs in the ladies’ sitting room.”

Hermione took a final look at herself in the full length mirror and nodded her approval. She felt that she needed a cunning weapon in her arsenal; the dress certainly fit the bill. She was not certain what the potency of veela magic might be, nor how it measured up against faerie magic. In the end, she decided to believe in the faeries — and she hoped against hope that the faeries would do her the honour of believing back.

With a sanguine heart, she headed up to the top of the house.



Late that night, Skye sat before the vanity mirror in the room she shared with Shadow, brushing her hair and humming to herself. Shadow sat on the window seat cushion, looking out at the back garden, and at the Phoenix House, across the low hedge.

“Skye?” she said, not turning her face from the window.

“Hmm?” her older sister answered, continuing her brush strokes.



“Who do you really like? Is it Harry? Or is it Viktor Krum?”

Skye smiled at her own reflection. “I like both of them, silly. Harry is so sweet, and he has such pretty eyes — and, well, he’s *Harry Potter*, you know. And Viktor is so charming, so smooth — and so famous! Harry is nicer — but Viktor is more exciting..”

Shadow turned her back to the window now, a troubled look on her face.

“You like them because they’re *famous*?”

Skye put the brush down and turned to face Shadow. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing is wrong, exactly — only — you can’t pick someone to marry because they’re famous!”

Skye stood and crossed the room, nudging Shadow to budge up so she could sit down next to her.

“You’ve really got it bad for Ron, don’t you?” she said, softly.

Blue eyes met blue, and Shadow leaned her head on Skye’s shoulder.

“Mum says I’m too young — and that I’ll get over him — but I won’t, Skye.”

Skye spoke hesitantly. “The Law makes provision for people as young as fourteen contracting legally binding engagements, Shay — maybe you could —”

Shadow uttered a low chuckle. “It takes the consent of



your legal guardians. We might be able to convince Mum, but Severus? He treats me as if I'm in the nursery with Stormy — *and* he hates Ron. He always has, because Ron is Harry's best mate."

"I'll speak to Severus for you, Shay — if Mum and I both take your side, we can win him over." Skye tried to sound hopeful.

Shadow sighed loudly. "Ginny said the Headmaster is permitting seventh years to be married and to live in a married students' dormitory. But I'll only be a sixth year — the best I can hope for is to have Mum and Severus consent to a binding engagement..." Her voice weakened and the tears started up again. "I'm so *tired* of crying," she whispered.

Skye enveloped Shadow in her arms, crooning and petting her much as their mother would have done.

"Oh, Skye," Shadow sobbed, sounding as if her heart would break, "have you ever loved a boy like this?"

Skye rocked her sister back and forth, stroking her hair, and gazing with unseeing eyes out at the dark night.

"No, Shay," she whispered, almost as if to herself. "I never have."



In the next room, Ginny and Luna each sat on their own beds, facing one another in the light of one candle, their



feet tucked up beneath their nightdresses.

"Do you think you'd want to be married, and to live in the married students' dormitory?" Luna asked, absentmindedly plaiting and unplaiting her long, dirty blonde hair.

Ginny placed her bare feet flat on the rug between their beds and leaned forward, her expression intense. "I would live in a barn, Luna — I couldn't care less! — if I can marry the boy I want, I won't care about anything else."

Luna's hands became still and she looked Ginny in the eye. "Does he know you want him?"

Ginny's eyes clouded. "*I thought* he did — the night at the museum dedication, I was sure. But when I've seen him since then, I haven't been able to tell."

Luna's feet now braced on the floor as she leaned towards Ginny, a question in her gaze. "But Draco danced with *me* that night."

Ginny's hands came out and grasped Luna's wrists. "I don't love Draco!" she said, giving the other girl a little shake.

Luna looked relieved. "Sometimes I thought you loved Harry — but Draco talked a lot to you, too." The slightly protuberant blue eyes searched Ginny's freckled face. "Are you sure you prefer Harry? Draco is so beautiful."

Ginny's hands slid down and clasped Luna's. "I'm positive, silly. When you love a bloke, you can't see why anyone would want someone besides your man. For me, it's been



Harry-Ruddy-Potter since I was ten years old.”

Luna nodded seriously. “But what about Skye?”

Ginny released Luna’s hands, swinging her feet up beneath the duvet and leaning to blow out the candle.

“I love Skye like a sister — but I’ll hex her nose off if she tries to take Harry away from me,” she vowed.



Across the hall, Nymphadora Tonks sat at her writing desk, finishing the report she was due to turn in to Kingsley Shacklebolt the next morning. Briefly, she pondered what type of husband the handsome, muscular black Auror might make.

Her eye fell on the little pile of notes she had accumulated over the last few months and she began to leaf through them. On top were a couple of scrawls from Viktor; next were a series of billets doux from Sirius, each more outrageous than the last.

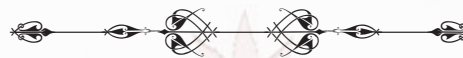
On the bottom of the pile were the nine letters Remus had sent to her, during the time of their courtship. The first several were clever, even funny, with humorous drawings in the margins. The last few became more serious in tone; still warm, but increasingly intimate, his words promising more, each time they met again...

And now she had only to see how obviously he pursued



Hermione, and how blatantly Hermione encouraged him.

Tonks left the parchment on the desk top as she turned to her bed. Tomorrow, she was leaving with the girls from Grimmauld Place to spend a weekend at Malfoy Manor. Perhaps old Lucius had a friend...



Lucius Malfoy inhaled deeply on the long, thin cigar between his lips, and gazed up at the star-filled heavens. By the end of this weekend, he would have the four-carat sapphire, currently residing in the underground vault, on Sophronia’s finger, and they would be planning their honeymoon trip around the world. Before long, his home would be full again of light and laughter — and even the sound of children’s voices. This time, he would not muck it up.

His pleasant cogitations were rudely interrupted as wands were thrust into his throat from either side, and a large shape loomed before him.

The cigarillo fell from his nerveless fingers; his other hand reached for his wand, and was seized and twisted mercilessly behind his back.

“How delightful it must be to grow comfortable and lax, now that our Lord is gone,” a disturbing voice hissed.

The dark figure moved closer, and Lucius clearly saw the familiar black robes, as well as the mask of the Death Eater.



“Mulciber, remove Lucius’ wand from his sleeve — yes, exactly like that, excellent. MacNair, release his arm — we are all old friends here, are we not?”

When Lucius recognized the voice of the masked man before him; the chill penetrated to his marrow, and involuntarily, he closed his eyes.

“Alverard,” he breathed.

“In the flesh,” the masked figure agreed.

DRACO SAT in his father’s library and admired the machine on the table before him. Once again, he depressed the red button protruding from the hard black plastic case and music filled the room.

Seamus Finnegan poked his best mate, Dean Thomas, in the shoulder. “Why didn’t you bring this to school? We could have had it in the dormitory. It would have been *brilliant*.”

“Brilliant,” Neville Longbottom echoed.

Dean snorted. “Electronics don’t work at Hogwarts, mate. Dumbledore’s wards are too strong.”

Draco’s attention was drawn as Dean pro-

duced a silver disc, which appeared to have handwritten words scrawled over its surface. “How did you write on that with a quill?” Draco asked curiously.

“Oh, you can’t write on them with a quill, mate, you have to use a permanent marker.” Dean pulled it out of his pocket and showed it to Draco. “This pen will write on any solid surface and the ink is permanent — don’t use it unless you want the marks to stay there forever.”

Draco popped the cap off the pen and made a squiggle mark on the corner of an old issue of the DAILY PROPHECY. “The ink is just inside of it and you don’t have to use an ink bottle,” he mused. “Some Muggle things are quite interesting.”

Dean waved a hand at him. “Keep it; I’ve got others.” He pulled a paper from his pocket and handed it to Draco. “All of the songs on the disc have a reference to magic, except for that one you asked me to find for you. It’s the last one on there.”

A wicked smile played over Draco’s lips. “You’ll be here tonight, for the ball?” he asked.

Dean rolled his eyes. “You know girls — Lavender has been doing nothing but talk about this party for a week. She’s with Parvati and Padma for the rest of the day, doing their hair and all that.”

Seamus nodded. “We have the girls from Grimmauld Place staying here and we haven’t seen them since breakfast. It takes them all day to do what they do to get ready for a party.”

Dean regarded his best mate with slight superiority. “Just wait until you’re engaged to one. You spend half your life waiting for them to be ready to leave the house.” He spoke in a high-pitched, girlish voice. “I’ll be ready in two shakes, darling. I just have to shower, fix my hair, do my makeup, and change clothes four times...”

Neville laughed, Seamus snorted and Draco’s lips quirked upwards. Dean leaned back in his chair, like a man whose work is done. “When are you layabouts going to get off your arses and pick a girl?”

The smirks were instantly wiped off the faces of his auditors. Dean poked Seamus in the side with his elbow. “I thought you were on pretty good terms with Luna, mate.”

“No, *Malfoy* has Luna wrapped around his finger,” a voice proclaimed from the doorway.

All four of the boys at the table turned their heads to see Harry and Ron enter the room. Dean’s face was wreathed in smiles as he stood to punch Ron on the shoulder and shake Harry’s hand.

“Yeah, poor Seamus mucked up his chance with Luna — silly sod doesn’t know better than to let *Malfoy* steal a march on him,” Ron chortled.

Draco stayed in his seat, his lips pressed in a tight line, refusing to rise to the baiting of Potter and Weasley.

Harry took the chair directly opposite Draco’s and

surveyed him with cool green eyes. “Luna is a particular friend of mine,” he said quietly.

Seamus and Dean looked with some alarm over Harry’s head at Ron; Ron just gave a shake of his head and shrugged.

Draco returned Potter’s stare, unruffled and courteous; he did not speak.

“I would be very angry if anyone were to trifle with Luna’s feelings,” Harry commented reflectively.

“Are you asking a question or making an accusation, Potter?” Draco inquired.

Harry did not back down. “Take it however you want, *Malfoy*,” he replied, his meaning clear.

“If Professor Snape or Mr. Lovegood wish to ask what my intentions are, they can. I don’t answer to you.”

Harry stood from his place at the table. “You will if Luna comes to any harm,” he stated, then turned and walked out of the room with Ron in his wake.

Seamus and Dean looked nervously over at Draco, who met their glances with a self-deprecating smile. “Was it something I said?” he murmured. He was pleased with the relieved chuckles from his companions.

At least *some* of his Order comrades didn’t hate his guts.

Lucius sat beside Sophronia on the marble bench beneath

the oak tree at the edge of the rose garden and watched the youngest Snape child as she frolicked on the lawn with her pygmy puff. Though he thought “Stormy” was a ridiculous name for a child, the girl herself was not objectionable. He would certainly take a firm line with Sophronia when it came time to name their children! No, Stormy would be as pretty as her older sisters when she grew up; aside from a lamentable dependence upon the company of her mama, she was a nice child. She would undoubtedly enjoy the Wizarding preparatory academy Lucius had found for her in Wales. The school took children from ages seven to ten and prepared them for Hogwarts. It was a boarding school, and frightfully expensive — surely that would make it acceptable to Sophronia? And then he would have Sophronia all to himself, her undivided attention for him alone. Soon, she would be breeding with their own baby, and a Malfoy infant would give her thoughts the proper direction, toward *their* family, and away from the Snape children.

She could then devote the rest of her pampered life to being the mother of his children and the delight of his heart. What more could a woman want, really?

It had not been easy to rid himself of Alverard, MacNair, and Mulciber after their meeting in the garden. Alverard, naturally, was the spokesman, demanding information regarding the movements of Severus Snape. Lucius had a

shrewd notion of why Alverard was so interested in Severus, but he had maintained an air of aggrieved ignorance, explaining that he scarcely ever saw Snape. Alverard had interrogated him for over two hours, ever returning to the subject of Severus and hammering away for information. With his Occlumency shields firmly in place, Lucius had denied any pertinent knowledge and desperately tried to think of a plan to send the hooligans away. Without a doubt, it would be necessary to set the Aurors onto their trail, but first he had to get them away from his home. Nothing could be permitted to mar his plans for this weekend.

In the end, of course, gold had been the answer. His offer of a draft on his account at Gringotts had been scorned; did Lucius believe a fugitive Death Eater could walk in and cash a cheque? He had been forced to allow Alverard into his underground vault, where the Death Eater had filled a bag with the available gold and then demanded to be given the four-carat sapphire Lucius had meant for Sophronia’s engagement ring. Ultimately, it was his willingness to relinquish the jewel that had relieved him of the presence of the unsavoury criminals.

Would he ever stop paying the price for the plans his father had made for him to succeed in the world?

Sophronia stole a look at the austere profile of the man who sat beside her. His pale pointed face and white-blond hair enhanced his beauty; in repose, his cold grey eyes detracted from his appearance, but when he smiled or laughed at her, they warmed to such a degree that it made her a bit breathless. Indeed, Lucius and his physical attractiveness moved her in ways that her husband had never done. It strongly reminded her of how the dark-haired boy of her youth had made her feel. The emotion was not as strong or overwhelming as what she had felt then, but she reasoned that she was older now and less susceptible to such forces in her life. No, she was beginning to be convinced that, if marry she must, Lucius was the best alternative for her. His home was luxurious, his fortune large, she was attracted to him, and he was kind to her children. She knew he meant to ask her to marry him; she was virtually certain that her answer would be “yes” — her only caveat was that her own marriage must await the settlement of Skye’s affairs, and Skye did not seem to be any closer to settling on one young man now than she had been when they first arrived in London.

Sophronia had thought for a while that Skye might be in love with Harry Potter, in spite of Severus’ frequently voiced objections; then she had thought that Viktor Krum had captured her daughter’s uncooperative heart.

Now, she wasn’t at all sure that either of them had really engaged Skye’s emotions deeply.

Sophronia remembered quite well that, in her thirties, she had grown to believe that she, herself, had a rather cold nature. She had been a dutiful wife to Mr. Snape, and in time she had developed affection for him. He was certainly kind to her, and she believed that he loved her; she simply found herself unable to return his love, and decided that she must be one of those women she had heard of who did not care for the physical act of love.

But what about that summer in London? her traitorous brain goaded. What about how he made you feel?

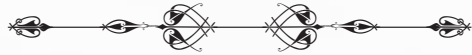
Sophronia shook her head to clear it of random reminiscences and placed a gentle hand on Lucius’ arm. “I believe I will take Stormy inside now,” she said. “It’s time to begin preparing myself for the ball, and the girls will need my assistance, I am sure.”

Lucius took the small hand on his sleeve and raised it to his handsomely chiselled lips. “If you must, my dear,” he murmured, gazing into her eyes with a wicked gleam. “I have no doubt that the results will be more than worth the loss of your company — but only just.”

Sophronia laughed softly as she removed her hand from his and stood. “Come, Stormy,” she called, and began to head back to the house.

Lucius watched her go with a possessive appreciation for her air of grace and breeding.

She would make the very finest lady of the Manor.



The ballroom at Malfoy Manor had been added in the last century, when such entertainments as formal balls were more common. The number of times the room had been used for dancing in the last fifty years was negligible. On this occasion, it was magnificent. Lucius had caused the ceiling and walls of the enormous room to be hung in a silvery blue silk, giving the impression of being inside an enormous tent. At intervals about the room stood marble pillars, half as tall as a man, bearing great silver bowls of roses in white and the palest pink, interspersed with baby's breath. At one end of the room was the dais for the orchestra; at the other were the row of French doors, opening out onto the terrace with steps down into the rose garden.

Severus Snape stood beside his old friend on the terrace and glared into the inviting, secluded grottos formed by the tastefully laid out rose garden.

"You just *had* to open the doors into the garden," he grumped.

Lucius regarded him with amusement. "Of what possible interest is that to you, Severus? Surely that ravishing



young fiancée of yours does not reduce you to consorting in the bushes."

Snape turned his baleful glare from the rosebushes to his host. "Do you have any idea how I spend my time at these affairs at Hogwarts? I spend it blasting the wretched student body *out* of the bloody rose garden! They perceive it as a safe haven for behaviour more fitted to a brothel!"

Lucius broke out into a shout of laughter quite unlike his usual lazy chuckles — he was indeed in high spirits. "By Merlin, old boy, I've never seen a fellow in more need of a bit of clandestine romance! Forget policing these children! We *want* them to pair off now, remember? What difference does it make if one or more of them go to be bound with a baby in their bellies? Surely the making of wizard babies is the whole bloody point, anymore?"

Snape's lips thinned. "I will *not* have the young women under *my* care used in such a fashion by a ragtag bunch of dunderheaded louts! I pledged to keep these children chaste and I mean to do so. Dear God, Lucius, is it not bad enough that we force them to marry, without also tempting them to make their choices based upon an episode of rampant hormonal groping in the bushes? Put lights in that garden if you do not wish for me to spend the evening decimating your roses and emasculating your guests."

Thus, Snape got his way, and Lucius instructed the



house-elves to place decorative lanterns at strategic intervals throughout the garden.



Minerva McGonagall made the rounds of the girls' rooms, ascertaining those who might be in need of her assistance, whether in dressing for the ball, or calming over-excited nerves.

In the room shared by Ginevra Weasley and Luna Lovegood, the air was fraught with tension. Miss Weasley stood before the looking glass, dispassionately appraising herself in the emerald green gown she wore.

"It just matches his eyes," she murmured.

"Whose eyes, Miss Weasley?"

Ginny turned in surprise when she heard the Scottish burr. She debated for a moment, then answered honestly, "Harry's eyes, ma'am."

McGonagall pursed her lips. "You know that Mr. Potter is bound to marry by the New Year, and that your mother intends for you to finish school before you marry?"

"How hard would you be willing to fight for your life's happiness, Professor? Whose feelings would you *not* disregard if they stood in the way of your happiness?" The youngest Weasley spoke with a dead serious resolution that was not to be discounted.



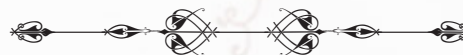
Luna Lovegood entered the room from the attached bath, hearing only the last of Ginny's words. "Ginny has been telling me that now is not the time to be shy about what we want, ma'am," Luna said, sounding as if she could scarcely credit her own daring. "If ever there was a time to stand up and say what you mean, now is it."

McGonagall turned her stern gaze to Luna. "What do you mean to say, Miss Lovegood?"

Luna took a deep breath before she spoke; still, her voice was so soft that it was necessary to strain to hear her. "I mean to say that I love Draco Malfoy and it makes me *proud*."

McGonagall experienced an inner qualm as she considered Lucius Malfoy's response to the prospect of Luna Lovegood as a daughter-in-law. She allowed nothing of her reaction to show on her face; she simply nodded her head. "You have every reason to be proud," she said. "Now, please hurry, girls; we are expected downstairs in fifteen minutes."

And with that she left the room.



Hermione slipped the dark coral faerie silk gown over her head and turned her back so that Alicia Spinnet could fasten up the back.

"Oh, no," Hermione breathed, staring into the mirror. Tonks peeked around from behind her. "What is it?"



Hermione stood straighter and tugged at the back of the bodice as if to pull it down in the back and up in the front. "It's the neckline. Sophronia had to let out the bodice just a bit — and the neckline has dropped almost an inch."

Alicia turned Hermione so that she and Tonks could look her over. "It is a little bit on the daring side," Alicia agreed judiciously, staring at Hermione's chest.

Tonks snorted. "Loads of witches would *kill* to fill out a dress that way. What are you complaining about?"

Hermione took a deep breath and turned once again to survey herself. "Nothing can be done about it now. I don't dare try to charm an alteration — it might damage the fabric."

Tonks patted her on the shoulder. "Face it, Hermione. You're just going to have to keep your shoulders back and hold your head high. Look as if you *meant* to show that much cleavage."

Ginny slipped into the room in time to hear Tonks' last comment. "I don't think anyone will think twice about the neckline, Hermione. They will be noticing the faerie silk gown." Ginny pushed Hermione toward the dressing table. "Hurry up! You haven't even done your hair yet!"

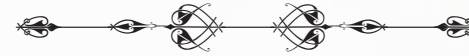
Hermione sat down. "Alicia is going to do it for me — my hands are a bit shaky tonight."

Tonks cast her a sidelong look. "I wonder why?" she said snidely.

Hermione smiled, but did not answer aloud.



Not for the reason you imagine, she thought to herself.



Stormy bounced excitedly about the large room given over to Sophronia's use, exclaiming over the beauty of her mother and sisters.

"Mama, your dress matches your room," she said, for the fifth time.

Sophronia, who was in the act of pinning Shadow's hair into a very grown-up style, smiled at her youngest child. "You are right about that, my love. Do sit down, now."

Shadow looked at her image in the dressing table mirror. "Thank you, Mum — it looks so pretty."

Skye came up and bent to look in the mirror at her sister's reflection. "You'll be the belle of the ball, Shay," she said sweetly.

Shadow stood and swirled over to the full-length mirror, admiring her very first ball gown. It was of pale yellow satin, with the demure neckline appropriate for a girl her age.

"What is Severus going to say?" she wondered out loud.

"He will say nothing about it. I have already spoken to him," Sophronia assured her. "If this were a public ball, you would not be attending, but as it is a ball held in a private home, there can be no objection." Sophronia stood and walked over to Shadow. "Do you remember the rules I have set for you?"



Shadow spoke in the tone of one who has memorized her lesson. "Do not dance more than two times with anyone, do not leave the ballroom to go outside with anyone, do not laugh or talk too loudly, remember that I am a lady and behave like one."

Sophronia nodded her approval and turned to take Stormy by the hand. Behind her mother's back, Shadow rolled her eyes at Skye, who smiled and came up to kiss her cheek. "I had to follow the same rules at my first grown-up party," she assured her sister as they followed their mother from the room.

"I will just take Stormy up to Winky now," Sophronia said to her older daughters, beginning to climb to the next level in the Malfoy house. "Why don't you go see if the other girls need your help? I will meet you downstairs."



The Snape sisters entered Hermione and Alicia's room just as Tonks slumped disconsolately into a squishy armchair.

Skye reached out maternal hands. "Tonks! You'll crease your gown!" she cautioned.

Tonks gave a little shrug and made a face. She had no great expectations for the ball, really. The man who *had* wanted her now wanted Hermione; the other two men who *had* flirted with her were now flirting with other women.



She could not bring to mind the name of one wizard of her acquaintance in whom she had the least interest... except for Remus Lupin, of course.

She really *was* destined for the Office of Last Resort.

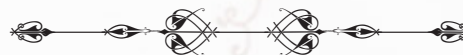
Alicia stepped back from Hermione and considered the arrangement of Hermione's curls. "Do you like it?" she asked for the third time that evening.

Hermione surveyed the results of Alicia's deft fingers. "Yes, thank you," she said.

Alicia sighed with relief that she had finally achieved a result with those dark corkscrew curls that Hermione approved.

"Thank Nimue for that," Ginny muttered, turning in a tight circle to give each of her friends one last visual check before going downstairs to the men. "I think we're all finally ready."

Hermione stood from the dressing table and gave her companions a happy smile. "I have a good feeling about tonight. Let's go break some hearts," she said, and headed for the door.



The young men of the Order milled about in the Entrance Hall at Malfoy Manor, waiting for their female counterparts to descend from the regions above. The girls had disappeared right after lunch and had not been seen or heard from in hours. What did they *do* up there?



Time was passing, the summer was marching toward the autumn, and the New Year was fast approaching. They would all be married within six months and it was time to become serious about looking for a partner. Each of the young men felt the excitement surrounding this party. Obviously it was special — just look at the way the girls were acting.

It was a common occurrence to walk into a room at Phoenix House and to find one of their friends pacing and trying to memorize something clever to say at the next party. There was not a one amongst them who had not practiced a speech or two before the mirror, in hopes of finding favour with one of the young women.

What can I say to make her notice me? was a frequent train of thought, as well as, *What can I do to impress her, to make her want me?*

There was a slight stir as someone appeared on the half landing and began a descent down the grand staircase. Seeing that it was only Sophronia Snape, however, the boys went back to their various thoughts and conversations.

Sophronia noted, with an inward smile, how very grown-up the young men looked in their dress robes. Even Severus was looking distinguished, if no less forbidding than usual. Her eyes fell then upon Lucius Malfoy, who was engaging Severus in low-voiced conversation. When Lucius looked up and met her gaze, that irresistible gleam



lit his eyes and he came forward to stand at the foot of the staircase. As she completed her descent, he placed his right hand over his heart and executed a profound bow with a majestic flourish.

Sophronia's answering curtsy was a thing of beauty; even the Quidditch talk amongst the boys was halted at this arcane demonstration of the manners of a forgotten time.

The smattering of applause from above caused all eyes to travel back up to the landing, where the young ladies were grouped. From the young wizards of the Order, there was a collective intake of breath.

For indeed, the young witches were breathtaking. Here then, was the evidence of what they had been doing all day — making themselves so heartbreakingly beautiful that the men could do nothing but gaze upward in admiration. For that moment, the enchanting young women were the dazzling stars hovering just beyond the reach of the wizards at their feet. Now the young men knew the purpose of this night — to win the attention, the regard, perhaps even the love of the girl of their dreams.

Standing in the shadows of the corridor beside the first floor landing, Minerva McGonagall watched her charges. Each of these girls, though they did not know it, would be the most beautiful woman in the room to one of the men present tonight. How many of them would become aware

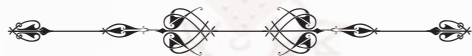


of the man who admired them the most?

For a moment in time, the hall was silent as the young women stood in the spotlight of the appreciation of the men of the Order. Then McGonagall came from behind them, quietly scolding.

“The guests will be arriving at any time, girls, please do *not* dawdle!”

The spell was broken and the girls were herded down the steps and into the midst of the young men; almost immediately, the bell chimed and house-elves moved forward to answer the door, while Lucius and Draco took their places at the ballroom doorway to welcome their guests.



Fleur Delacour had not accompanied the women of Grimmauld Place to Wiltshire on Friday afternoon; in accordance with her mother’s wishes, she had arrived at Malfoy Manor on Saturday, in the escort of her brother.

Val Delacour had glowered defiantly at Snape and crossed his arms protectively over his chest when invited to the shrubbery and forced to explain his unlooked-for presence. “My mother insisted I bring Fleur to this party,” he defended himself petulantly.

“Give me no reason to notice your existence,” Snape had advised contemptuously before walking away.



Now, Fleur descended the staircase on her brother’s arm, eagerly looking about for her fiancé. She caused no small stir as she made her way through arriving guests in the Entrance Hall, then on into the ballroom, where the people mingled and chatted in small groups, waiting for the dancing to begin. She wore a gown that moulded her form exactly, from her armpits to her ankles, showcasing the perfection of her figure; a slit up the back reached almost to the level of her knees. The hue of the gown was such that she seemed to be covered by a thin coating of ice. The only colour in her ensemble appeared on her ears, at her throat, and on the third finger of her left hand — the emeralds Snape had given her as an engagement gift.

Val Delacour delivered his sister into Snape’s general sphere, then disentangled himself and fled the vicinity.

Hermione, spotting Fleur from across the room, narrowed her eyes and admitted to herself that open warfare had now been declared; subtlety was out the window. She looked ruefully down at the delicate stuff of the faerie silk gown, and mourned; it seemed somehow unspeakable to her that the magic of this beautiful dress should be put in the shade by the nearly-naked veela-girl, whose effrontery apparently knew no bounds.

Snape saw Fleur’s entrance with tight-lipped wrath. Where was the well-behaved witch from the respected



family to whom he had offered his name? What did she mean by daring to appear in public in such indecent apparel?

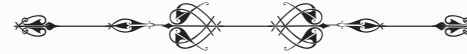
Sophronia, who was moving through the room keeping a watchful eye on the young women in her charge, was dismayed at the sight of Fleur's dress. When she saw the expression on Severus' face, a look she had known and dreaded in his father, she advanced quickly to Fleur's side, and reached her just as Severus did.

"Good evening, Fleur," she said in her soft voice. "How very lovely you look."

"Thank you, Sophronia," Fleur said, looking down at her body in the dress. As she did, Sophronia looked directly into Severus' eyes. She saw the cold anger there and she bravely held his gaze until he appeared to recollect his surroundings. When she saw the impassive mask drop again over his features, she directed her gaze back to Fleur, who had been entirely oblivious to the interplay taking place over her head. Satisfied that she might safely leave the matter in her stepson's hands, Sophronia excused herself and moved on to speak to someone else.

Fleur tucked her arm through that of her fiancé, smiling up at him in a dazzling way. With faultless courtesy, Snape replied to her greeting, far too proud to let it be seen by prying eyes that he had any misgivings as to her appearance. There would be plenty of time, when they

had an opportunity to speak in private, to explain to her precisely what his thoughts were on the subject.



Hermione tore her gaze away from the drama she had just witnessed; when Snape had seen Fleur, and Sophronia had interceded to keep the peace, she had been forced to bite her tongue to keep from giving vent to the bubble of laughter that rose to her lips. Perhaps veela-magic was not strictly to the professor's taste, after all. Cheered, she turned once again to the conversation of her friends.

Lavender Brown, wrapped happily around her husband-to-be, asked, "Who are you dancing the first dance with, Hermione?"

"I'm promised to Remus, but I don't see him," she said, looking about the room, which was becoming more crowded by the moment.

"Isn't he staying here?" Dean asked, holding Lavender proudly to his side with a possessive arm.

"No, the boys are sleeping here, but Remus and Sirius are just coming for the party," Ginny answered, staring unhappily across the room at Harry and Skye, who were chatting animatedly with Tonks and Viktor Krum.

Seamus came up and spoke quietly to Ginny. "Ready? The orchestra is about to begin."

Ginny turned to her partner for the first dance and gave

him a glittering smile. "Yes, I'm ready."

Hermione saw Percy Weasley watching her suspiciously and she began to walk along the edge of the room, away from him.



Harry stood with Skye as they chatted with their friends, but he found it difficult to keep his eyes away from Ginny, who seemed to be burning with an inner flame tonight that cast every other girl in the room into the shade. He was careful not to ignore Skye, and tried his best not to glare at Seamus — if he was not dancing with the girl of his choice for this opening dance, he had no one but himself to blame, after all.

He was distracted from his thoughts as Neville and Luna wandered over to join them, followed by Ron and Shadow. After a moment, Skye turned to Ron and said, "Who is that man who just came in?"

Ron glanced over and replied, "That's my oldest brother, Bill. He's a curse-breaker."

Bill was standing near the entrance, greeting his twin brothers and their twin fiancées. His hair was tied back in a queue and he wore his black dress robes with casual ease; apparently, the formality of the occasion did not require that he leave off his golden fang earring. He was a sight to gladden the hearts of young women, a deed which he was apparently accomplishing without effort, judging



from the looks he was receiving.

"Wasn't he engaged to Fleur?" Skye said.

"Not engaged, but they *were* going out," Ron told her.

Skye turned to exchange a glance with her sister. "She gave *him* up for Severus?" she whispered.

Shadow grinned. "But he isn't *famous*, Skye."

Skye frowned and Shadow giggled.

"Famous?" Harry said, obviously confused.

"Never mind," Skye answered, continuing to watch Bill Weasley from across the room.



Snape stood dutifully with Fleur as she chattered about the party and their fellow guests. Nearby, Lucius and his son were engaged in a staring contest. Standing to Draco's left and impervious to his coldness, was Pansy Parkinson, the girl whom Lucius had long ago chosen to be his daughter-in-law. Draco had obediently paid court to her until the time when he had chosen to turn his back on his father's dictums and had joined in the efforts of the Order of the Phoenix.

Snape had been enjoying a glass of port in Lucius' library the evening before when Draco had been summoned and instructed to dance the first dance of the ball with Pansy. The battle of wills had been fierce and unpleasant. Only



Snape's intervention had prevented Draco from departing the parental home in high dudgeon. Snape took the boy by the elbow and constrained him to leave the library and stroll about the garden with him. Did Draco wish to leave Miss Lovegood alone at Malfoy Manor for the remainder of the weekend at his father's not-so-tender mercies? Draco had submitted with ill grace and Snape had returned to the library for another glass of port. The headache which had descended upon him during the Malfoy battle had made him even more vicious than usual in trouncing Lucius at chess.



Draco looked disdainfully away from his father, and searched until he saw Luna, chatting with Neville, who was now to dance the first dance as her partner. Luna's pink satin ball gown was surprisingly conventional, though her hairdo was a bit quirky, the mountains of dark blonde hair wound higher and higher upon her head, like a bees' hive. The curling wisps of hair that graced her nape emphasized the delicate beauty of her neck, so often obscured by her long, untidy hair and the absurd necklaces she chose to wear. He noticed that her throat was bare tonight, and that her only adornment was a pair of earrings, each comprised of a single dangling strand of



gold with one teardrop pink topaz at the end.

As if feeling his eyes upon her, Luna turned her head and looked straight into Draco's grey eyes. Her expression was completely unguarded. For a blinding moment, Draco saw her outside the context of his knowledge of her — she was slender, quite pretty, with an elusive quality he had never seen in another girl. Then what he knew of her flooded his mind — her appealing, forthright oddity, her courageous willingness to stand for what was right and to fight her enemies, her acceptance of him, in spite of what she knew of him as the son of a known Death Eater, as a Slytherin, as a tormentor of Harry Potter —

Draco took Pansy by the hand and pulled her along as he walked away from his father.

"Where are we going?" Pansy demanded peevishly, stumbling a bit in her high heels.

"Don't be angry with me, Pans, but there's someone I already promised this dance to."

Pansy tried to yank her hand from his, but he would not release her, continuing instead to pull her inexorably along with him. "*Draco!*" she protested desperately. "Stop!"

But he did not stop until he reached Neville Longbottom. "You know Miss Parkinson, don't you, Neville?" Draco said to the round-faced Gryffindor.

Neville gave Draco an uncertain look before turning



his gaze to the rather flushed young woman and bowing politely. "Of course. Good evening, Miss Parkinson."

Pansy gave a perfunctory curtsy, eyeing Neville speculatively. Draco spoke again. "There you go, Pans," Draco said. "Neville took top honours in our year in Herbology, you know. He knows all about flowers and plants — you can tell him about your gardening. I'm sure he would be honoured to dance with you."

Pansy gave Draco a sour look, clearly recognizing that she had been passed off to the first available chump, and also knowing Draco well enough to realize that she could not argue him out of whatever he was planning to do.

"Is that true, Mr. Longbottom?" she asked, with a show of practiced shyness. "Would you be honoured?"

Neville was in the act of valiantly offering his arm to Pansy when Draco touched Luna's elbow from behind, causing her to turn her startled face to him. The joy in her eyes made it all worthwhile to Draco.

"Will you open the ball with me, Miss Lovegood?" he asked her huskily, taking her hand in his.

Luna nodded and walked away from Neville without a backward glance.

Draco stepped up to the dais where the orchestra leader stood. "Luna Lovegood. *Luna Lovegood*," he said quietly.



Snape watched with ill-concealed amusement this masterful out-manoeuvring of his old friend, Lucius, by his oh-so-Malfoy son.

The Master of Ceremonies stepped forward and announced, "Mr. Lucius Malfoy and Mrs. Sophronia Snape; Mr. Draco Malfoy and Miss Luna Lovegood."

The two Malfoy men stepped onto the dance floor from separate ends of the room; Lucius was glaring daggers at his disobedient son, but Draco had eyes for no one but the girl in his arms.

The music began, and Sophronia easily regained her partner's attention. In a rather forward move for her, she allowed the fingertips of the hand resting on Lucius' shoulder to flare out and briefly caress the line of his jaw, before resuming their chaste position on his robes. His startled eyes flew to her face, and she smiled at him sweetly. "Is it so very bad?" she asked him, her steps suiting his nicely as they waltzed about the room. "He is very fond of her, I believe."

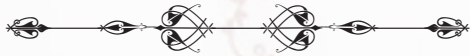
Lucius marveled at the beauty and desirability of the woman he held in his arms, feeling a very strong urge to kiss her possessively in the middle of the dance floor. The touch of her hand upon his face had driven all thought

of any other concern from his mind. He mastered the improper impulse, satisfying himself with tightening his hold upon her waist.

“The children will have to fend for themselves tonight, my dear,” he said, immersing himself in the depths of her bluebell eyes. “I created this ball for you — it is an imperfect setting for such a jewel, but I have done my poor best, and I fully intend to make sure that you enjoy your ball.”

Sophronia felt herself stiffening in his arms, not only from his rather tight hold upon her, but also from his words. She was seriously considering him for a husband, yet she found that she did not particularly care to hear him say to her that he had given the ball for her, even if she knew it was true. It seemed improper for him to say so, somehow, as if it placed her in his debt.

In spite of the years she had spent as a Snape, Sophronia had yet to master the intricacies of Slytherin scheming.



After several bars of the first song, the other guests joined the Malfoys on the dance floor. Snape led Fleur into the dance, keeping a rigid distance between his torso and hers, refusing to grant the world the satisfaction of seeing him with his fiancée rubbing her body all over him. He was polite, but impersonal and distant. After several attempts,

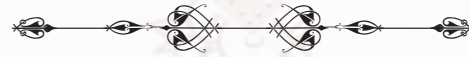


Fleur stopped trying to initiate a conversation and simply danced in silence, her mind coldly laying out her options for her perusal. The ice-silver dress had obviously been a waste of gold. What would it be necessary for her to do if she wished to bind this man to her irrevocably?

She stole a look at his face and saw him staring intently to one side. Following his line of sight, she found herself looking at the revolting prospect of Remus Lupin dancing with animal grace and laughing down into the upturned face of none other than Hermione Granger.

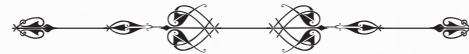
Granger. Always Granger.

Her resolution hardened. Tonight, then.



Tonks circled the room with Viktor as her partner; it was a triumph, to have been his choice of partner for the first dance, and she felt the jealous eyes of other women following her in his embrace. In spite of her best intentions, her own recreant eyes kept returning to Remus as he held Hermione in his arms. Had he ever laughed that happily with her?

Was it too late to fight for him?



Bill Weasley moved amongst the guests who were not



dancing, pausing to shake hands and exchange words with those he knew. His mother had insisted that he attend this function; when he had shown resistance, Molly had sweetly offered to drop by his flat and dress him for the occasion. Upon that threat, he had acquiesced. Now, he found a piece of unused wall, and leaned his shoulder upon it, crossing his arms over his chest and settling in to observe the dancers, deciding which of the girls he could ask to dance without raising their hopes of something more. Mum would want a list of whom he had seen and what he had done; it was easier to answer her questions than it was to argue with her.

There was Tonks, who was good for a dance. Hermione went by with Remus Lupin; she would dance with him — that made two dances. Neville Longbottom was dancing with a rather hard-faced girl he didn't know; there was Ron, with a chit who could scarcely be old enough to attend a ball — but the child looked familiar. Next he saw Harry, dancing with...

Bill looked desperately around, until he spotted his former Head of House, sitting in an armchair and chatting comfortably with the dumpy little woman who had been his Herbology professor. Bill approached them quickly, apologized for interrupting them, and turned his charming smile on Professor McGonagall. "Ma'am, do you know

that girl? The one dancing with Harry?"

"Of course I know her, Mr. Weasley; that is Skye Snape."

Bill's mind raced. Snape? That girl was a *Snape*?

"Please tell me she didn't marry Severus," he said, feeling nauseous.

McGonagall snorted. "Don't be absurd! She is Severus' half-sister."

Bill looked quickly into McGonagall's eyes. "You mean she isn't married? But is she betrothed?"

"Not that I am aware of, Mr. Weasley. Why do you ask?"

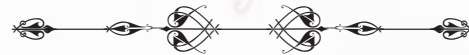
Bill pulled McGonagall to her feet and kissed her cheek, giving her a hug to go with it.

"Bill!" she protested half-heartedly. "Behave yourself!"

For good measure, Bill leaned down and kissed the cheek of a laughing Professor Sprout, too.

"But why?" the little witch wanted to know, as the orchestra finished their first number, and Bill set off across the room.

"Because I am one happy wizard tonight!" Bill said gleefully.



The first dance came to an end and the dancers politely applauded the orchestra and moved to find their next partners. Hermione glanced curiously around the room. "Where is Sirius?" she asked Remus.

Remus frowned. "I thought he was right behind me. He was promised to Varen Vector for the first dance — oh, she doesn't look very happy, does she?"

Hermione saw the dangerous glint in the eye of her former Arithmancy professor. "Uh oh," she murmured. "And here he comes now."



Sirius Black gave the characteristic toss of his head which removed the over-long fringe of his black hair from his eyes. He looked splendid in crimson dress robes, with elaborate gold embroidery on the mandarin collar — and he was well aware of it. He could not resist the temptation of wearing Gryffindor colours to Lucius Malfoy's house — but he *was* a bit late; it appeared that the first dance was already over. It would take some inspired grovelling to get back into Varen's good graces, now.

With the unconscious style that had ever been his trademark, Sirius strolled into Malfoy's ballroom as if he owned the place, prepared to have a light-hearted good time.

The sight which met his eyes made him feel as if he had just done a head-first dive into the Headmaster's Pensieve.

There she was, the seraph whose face had haunted his dreams every day of the twelve years he had spent in Azkaban Prison. Virtually unchanged by time, she seemed



to him, with her golden hair, ridiculously blue eyes, rose petal lips, and flawless skin — looking just as she ought in her ball gown in the middle of an elegant ball room, like a queen. Her name fell from his lips like an answered prayer. "Sophie!"



Skye and Harry ended the first dance, each with their attention focused elsewhere.

Harry began, "Skye, you won't mind if..."

"Harry?"

Harry and Skye turned as one to find Bill Weasley towering over them.


"Bill!" Harry said happily, shaking the other wizard's hand. "You made it!"

Bill cut his eyes to Skye, and Harry grinned in understanding. "Bill, this is..."

Bill had already stepped up to the angel from his vision, that day in the window of Madame Malkin's shop. "Skye," he breathed, as Harry spoke her name. "What a perfect name for an ethereal creature."

Skye blushed prettily, but did not lower her eyes from Bill's. Harry did not see her willingly take Bill's hand for the next dance; he was too busy searching for Ginny.





Sophronia stood beside Lucius at the end of their dance, politely applauding the orchestra. As she turned to move from the middle of the room, her eye fell upon Sirius Black, standing just inside the door and staring at her as if he were seeing a ghost. She felt her face flushing; it was odd, seeing him tonight when she had been thinking of him so often lately. But why on earth was he gaping that way?


“Sirius?” she said softly, after hearing him speak her nickname from her school days.

He crossed the room to her in two strides, oblivious to the interested glances of the other guests, and clasped the elegant little hands she had impulsively extended to him.

“Sophie, what are you doing here? I thought you were gone!”

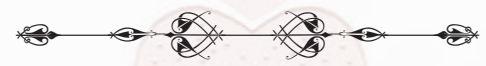
She laughed softly. “Where would I go? Where did you expect me to be? I’ve been living in your house for weeks.”

Ideas rushed through his mind at the speed of light, as connexions were made and his joy at finding her again overwhelmed his anger at the perfidy of the one from whom he would presently demand an explanation. The orchestra, oblivious to the vignette taking place on the dance floor, began to play the next number. Sirius gathered Sophronia into his arms and swept her into the dance, saying in pass-




ing, “Sorry, Malfoy — I believe this dance is mine.”

Sophronia, had she been able to look away from the mesmerizing grey eyes of the most notoriously bad boy of her generation, would have been disturbed by the look of cold outrage on the face of Lucius Malfoy, standing abandoned in the middle of his own ballroom in the midst of his happily dancing guests.



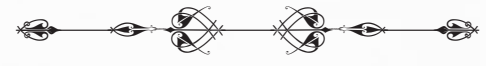
Lupin and Hermione watched the entire tableau with Sirius, Sophronia, and Lucius Malfoy unfold, then looked at one another with great foreboding.

“What was *that* all about?” Hermione wondered out loud.

Lupin took her by the arm and led her from the dance floor, moving to a table from which he procured a glass of lemonade, which he offered to Hermione.

“They went out together when we were at school,” he told her. “But Sirius never stayed with any girl for very long, and Sophronia had numerous blokes who fancied her.”

“Well, that hasn’t changed,” Hermione murmured as she watched Lucius Malfoy stalk to a refreshment table and pick up a glass of pink champagne.



Neville danced the second dance with Pansy, then they



sat out the third dance and drank iced lemonade on the terrace. Pansy was smarter about flowers than anyone Neville knew, with the exception of Professor Sprout and himself. She had a garden at her home, which her parents allowed her to design and plant on her own. As they sat on the Malfoy terrace, they exchanged comments about the layout of the elaborate rose garden.

Pansy listened to Neville's comments about the proper prevention of aphid infestation in rosebushes and thought to herself that he was really far nicer than any of the boys from Slytherin. For one thing, he did not sneer at her hobby. For another, he actually listened to her when she spoke. Furthermore, the Longbottoms were as old a pure-blood family as any; even her father could not object to a connexion with the family on those grounds.

So she willingly agreed to Neville's request to escort her to supper.



Snape sat with Fleur at supper — well, he sat with her as much as he could have been said to sit with anyone. He frequently left her side to police the tables across the room where sat his sisters and the other young ladies from Grimmauld Place. He also left the room for several minutes, after doing what seemed to be a head count.



"Where are you going?" Fleur demanded.

"Into the garden — it appears there may be some need of chaperonage in the rose bushes."

With his lips pressed into a grim line, he strode away. Fleur looked about for company, and spied Percy Weasley, who was in conversation with his twin brothers. When Percy perceived Fleur's eye upon him, he smiled politely and excused himself to his brothers.

"How do you do, Miss Delacour?" he asked with a slight bow.

"I am very well, Percy — please, call me Fleur. Come, sit with me. Are you having a nice time?"

"Delightful," he replied.

"I saw you dance the quadrille with Miss Granger. You looked very nice together."

Percy's face darkened. "I asked to bring her in to supper, but she is sitting with Lupin." His lip curled. "That fellow has no serious intentions towards her, can she not see that?"

Fleur pursed her lips. "She is very young, you know. I'm sure that she will see who truly cares for her before long. She is a very fortunate young woman to have attracted *your* attention, Percy."

Percy swelled a bit under this flattery. "Well, I do think I am a far more serious person, more the type that Hermione would appreciate than *he* is."

Fleur lowered her voice. "Shall I speak to Severus for



you, Percy? He is her chaperone, after all.”

Percy nodded earnestly. “Would you, Fleur? I would be very grateful if you felt you could.”

Fleur gave him an oddly satisfied smile. “It would be my pleasure, I promise you.”



Lucius escorted Sophronia to supper; fortunately, he had secured her promise long before. By some adroit manoeuvring, and with the collusion of his house-elves, no one joined them at their table, nor were they disturbed. Lucius had the opportunity to exercise the full magnitude of his charm upon her, to no avail. Sophronia was far too well brought up to show inattention to her partner, but she was obviously distracted.

“I take it Black was surprised to see you?” he finally said.

Sophronia glanced up at him with guilty eyes. “He thought I had married and moved out of the country,” she explained.

“It is a shame he should have learned any differently,” he murmured. “Perhaps, given a few more weeks, you might have done so.”

Sophronia smiled a bit mechanically. “I cannot make such decisions until I have Skye settled.”

Lucius glanced over to the table occupied by the Weasley siblings and their supper partners. “One of the Weas-



leys seems vastly pleased with her,” he said.

Sophronia looked over to see her daughters sitting side-by-side, book-ended by two tall Weasley brothers.

“Oh, dear,” she said.

Lucius raised his eyebrows in inquiry.

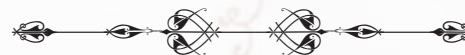
“Severus is not really pleased with the Weasleys,” she explained.

Lucius nodded. “Understandable,” he said.

Sophronia stood, folding her napkin and placing it on her plate. “I find the entire family to be charming,” she said quietly. “I am going upstairs to check in on Stormy, if you will excuse me.”

Lucius stood also. “I’m sure the house-elves would come for you if she were in need of you,” he coaxed, hoping to keep her with him.

Sophronia looked into his face, as if she were seeing something new about him. “A child is always in need of her mother,” she responded before leaving him.



The guests returned to the ballroom following supper to find Draco Malfoy in the place of the Master of Ceremonies.

“The orchestra are sitting down to a quick supper,” he informed them with a very charming smile. “We will carry on with a few fun songs until they rejoin us. Let us



consider the subject of... magic.”

Draco placed the disc player on the podium and spoke a quiet spell to increase the sound, then pressed the button. Magically amplified music filled the room.



Lupin began to laugh when the first song began to play. “What’s so funny?” Hermione asked him.

“*Do You Believe in Magic* — it’s an old Muggle song from the sixties.”

Hermione sniffed and stepped onto the dance floor. “Don’t you know how to dance to rock and roll?”

Lupin gave her a wicked look. “I know a challenge when I hear one.”

Hermione saw that many of her friends remained on the side of the room, watching the older people hit the dance floor and relive their youth. She noticed that Percy was involved in a conversation with Fleur, with Snape holding up the wall at their side. As she watched, Varen Vector strolled over to Snape and spoke to him. He turned an amused face to his fellow professor; Hermione saw Fleur smile up at him and nod, then Snape gave Professor Vector a bit of a bow and allowed her to lead him onto the floor.

Lupin saw the look of incredulity on her face and followed her gaze. “Does that surprise you?” he asked her,

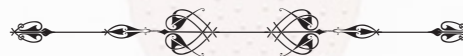


a bit short of breath. “They were in the same house, you know — they were friends.”

The song medley segued into *Every Little Thing She Does is Magic*, and Snape actually laughed out loud at something Professor Vector said to him as they matched their steps to the new beat.

“Good heavens, of course it does!” Hermione answered in amazement. “He looks quite human.”

And a thoughtful look descended upon her face.



When the medley finished to the strains of *Magic Man*, the dancers were happy for a chance to catch their breath and pick up a cold drink from one of the refreshment tables. Draco ascended to the dais again.

“The next song is the lady’s choice,” he said. “I have chosen it in honour of my father,” he added, saluting his parent, who stood among the guests with a curious expression upon his face. The guests applauded and Lucius raised a careless hand in answer, and even took a bit of a bow.

“Now ladies,” Draco continued, “each of you knows a wizard like this. Find the one you would call a *Smooth Operator* and ask him to dance.”

A ripple of laughter ran through the crowd. The beginning strains of the song began to play and the witches



took that cue to seek out their partners.

Neville was astonished to have Pansy approach him with her hand extended.

"I'm not s-smooth," he stuttered, proof positive that he was not.

Pansy gave him a genuine smile. "I think you are," she told him.

Ginny and Shadow were standing with Harry and Ron and they quickly laid their claims.

Luna was standing several steps behind the others, watching Draco on the dais with shining eyes. There was a cough and a choking noise from the curtained doorway behind her. She glanced over her shoulder, but saw only a slightly billowing drape. When she heard the choking noise again, she slipped behind the screen that partially hid the doorway and pulled the curtain to one side.

Just inside the small room on the other side of the drape, a fair-haired, handsome man was slumped in an armchair. His breathing appeared to be laboured, and Luna approached him quickly.

"Are you all right?" she asked, kneeling beside the man.

He opened his eyes and looked at her. She recognized him then, as Fleur's brother, Val Delacour. His eyes seemed a bit bleary, but he spoke to her rationally enough.

"I was just feeling a little sick," he murmured, looking

her over in a frankly appraising way.

"Shall I fetch someone? Your sister?"

Luna began to rise, and Val took her wrist. "Please don't go just yet. I'm sure I will feel better directly if you could just hand me that cup of water."

Luna saw the punch glass on the table beside his chair and handed it to him; it smelled of spirits, and did not look like water. "I could get some water for you," she offered helpfully, genuinely distressed for him. "It is so unpleasant to feel unwell."

Val allowed his hand to travel up her arm, then back down to her wrist. "I'm feeling better already," he promised her.



Hermione and Lupin watched as four different women converged on the spot where Sirius was standing, each of the four apparently with old memories in their minds. Sirius had a comically dismayed expression on his face, until a rather determined Sophronia Snape reached him first and took his hand. Then he delivered one of his devastating smiles and meekly allowed her to lead him onto the floor.

"Dear Merlin, look at Malfoy. If looks could kill, Sirius would be one dead dog," Lupin murmured to her.

"Don't look behind you, Remus, but I think you're about to be tagged," Hermione told him. "You'll excuse

me, won't you? I have to do something."

Hermione walked away just as Lupin felt a hand on his shoulder, and he turned to find his heart's desire gazing up at him wistfully.

"Dance with me?" Tonks said.



Snape quirked his lips as Varen Vector excused herself and made a beeline for Lucius Malfoy. Some crushes apparently lingered on for years, he mused.

He crossed his arms and leant against the wall, cynically relishing the antics of the roomful of people. Sophronia was certainly making a fool of Lucius tonight with her romping with the Black mutt; it was most amusing.

He was entirely willing to be entertained.



Hermione approached him from the side. His attention was directed elsewhere, and she took a moment to simply look at him. His ravens' wing hair hung about his face without obscuring it. He wore the tailored black evening wear with an air that was so much a part of his bearing that it required no thought or effort on his behalf. The Order of Merlin pinned to his chest blazed under the multitude of candles in the crystal chandeliers. There was a



rather appealing half-smile on his face and in his eyes as he looked about him.

Until he saw her.



Snape turned his head and saw the Granger girl, standing and looking at him without a trace of challenge or guile. In an instant, his guard was up and he willed himself not to look away from her gaze. He had been watching her dancing with the werewolf all night long, laughing with him, eating with him, flirting with him — what in the world did she want now?

Those perfect corkscrew curls had been artfully pinned so that a very few of them framed her face whilst the rest clustered atop her head in a tumble of dark brown tresses. The frank brown eyes held the tiniest question as they rested on his face. Those lavish lips were very slightly parted. He would not permit himself to look below her face; he knew from an earlier, damning moment that the flame-coloured gown was cut very low across her full breasts.

As he stood, locked in her gaze, she astounded him by sweeping a deep curtsy. His eyes darted quickly right and left to make absolutely certain she was directing herself to him. Then he took her hand and placed insistent pressure upon it so that she rose again.



"Miss Granger," he growled, "you must not..."

She spoke simultaneously. "You *will* dance with me," she marveled, lightly squeezing the hand that held hers.

Acceding to the inevitable, he bowed and escorted her onto the floor.



Fleur, who had been making her way to her fiancé after the ladies' choice had been announced, stopped in her tracks when she saw Severus take the floor with Hermione Granger in his arms, showing himself to be every inch the "Smooth Operator" the song proclaimed him to be. How dared he humiliate her in this way?

Granger would be made to pay.

HERMIONE INHALED the scent of the musky shaving lotion he favoured as they slowly danced about the Malfoy ballroom. Her hand, clasped in his, felt so small and trembly. Her other hand, resting on his shoulder, was tickled by the constant movement of his hair swaying over her hypersensitive skin.



She knew an insane impulse to slide her hand beneath the shoulder-length black hair and cup the nape of his neck, before gliding her fingers through the ebony strands.

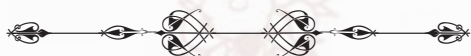
She was torn. She desperately wanted to make an impression upon him; she wanted to have an impact in this unprecedented moment she was afforded in the circle of his embrace. At the same time, she feared to alarm him. Not for one moment would she put it past him to startle like a wild thing and to flee her presence, leaving her bereft. How, then, to draw him in without frightening him off? From beneath her lashes, she darted a look up at his impassive countenance; her breath caught in her throat when she found his eyes upon her face.

Had dancing not already become second nature to her, in night after tedious night of repetition, the impact of his implacable gaze locking with her own might have caused Hermione to stumble. As it was, she first stiffened, then slowly melted into closer propinquity, held whole in the power of those obsidian eyes, until eye contact was replaced by body contact and her head came to rest upon his chest. It was as if the meeting of their eyes had plunged her, gasping, into icy water which swiftly rose over her head. Every instinct screamed for her to fight, to escape a watery grave. Yet, beneath the frigid surface water there lay a dark stratum of velvety warmth, waters so enticing that she aban-



done thoughts of struggle and sliced cleanly through to the dangerously alluring depths that welcomed her in, ever deeper, until the light above was wholly forgotten and the enveloping black was embraced.

Hermione exhaled a pleased sigh and moved her cheek against the fabric of his robes. There was a notion in her mind, a giggling thought, hovering just outside the reach of cognition; it floated through her reality like a mist, and for the length of its duration, she luxuriated beneath the blanket of unknowable certainty. No, it was not a notion; it was a fact. But within the fog, she was far too content to strain after understanding. Here, this moment of harmony with him, was bliss not to be questioned.



Snape held her in his arms as if she were made of spun glass. Emotions warred for precedence in his mind. Uppermost was a prescience of danger... danger... like a stubborn candle which refused to be extinguished, the warning flashed into his mind, over and again. Rationally, he knew there was no *danger*; the war was over, the Dark Lord was vanquished, the Wizarding world in general, and he in particular, were at theoretical peace. There was no threat here. Just a chit of a girl in a flame-coloured gown...

Snape schooled himself to calm, using the techniques

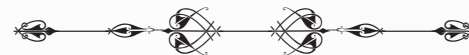


he had perfected so many years before. Steady, rhythmic breathing, in, out, in, with all his focus on slowing his heart rate. When he felt he had himself under control, he looked down his nose into the face of his tormentor. He was steeling himself to the disciplined acceptance of her proximity when those large, limpid brown eyes rose to meet his, and he was irretrievably lost.

She opened her very self to him, offering up her eyes and her mind for penetration. Decision trembled on the precipice as the saxophone trills of the song rippled through the air, then she was subsiding into his arms even as he was gathering her closer. And her scent washed over him, permeating every sense and bringing a firestorm of suppressed images to his beleaguered memory.

Her scent.

Strawberries and essence of almonds. In some cardinal, inexplicable way, she smelled of strawberries and essence of almonds. The underlying, driving rhythm of the song pounded in his blood; Hermione — *Hermione* — was unrestrainedly pressed up against his body, and her mind-altering scent deprived him of higher brain function. Only a fool would struggle against such exquisite incarceration.

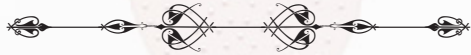


All throughout the ballroom, both those who danced



and those who watched the dancers found their attention repeatedly returning to the witch in the hot coral gown. There was an aura about her that simply drew the eye. Her current progress about the room, in the arms of the stern, unsmiling partner, seemed to the onlookers to be most portentous, in some ineffable way.

Only Minerva McGonagall watched Hermione Granger and Severus Snape in one another's arms with a troubled glimmer in her mind.



Fleur Delacour watched them from the arms of Percy Weasley, and her emotion was *rage*. She did not speak of it to Percy. She did not want anyone to pay mind to her fiancé dancing so closely to another woman when he had made it abundantly clear that he found such closeness to her, Fleur, to be distasteful in the extreme. In addition, she fully intended to bring about a match between Percy and the calamitous Miss Granger; no need to make him think poorly of the other witch when she wanted him to *offer* for the girl.

No, Fleur simply had to endure the remainder of this insufferable party, then she could put her own plan into motion.



Pansy twined the fingers of one hand in the hair at Nev-

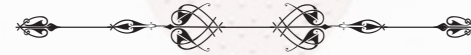


ille's nape. She felt the shudder elicited by the touch of her fingertips upon the bare skin of his neck. She knew he found her attractive, and wondered if she might be attracted to him, too — enough so make *that* part of marriage bearable. Experience made her doubt it.

The burning in Neville's eyes when he looked down into her face and returned the favour of the caress to the bare skin of *her* neck gave her hope.

"Take me to the rose garden," she whispered to him.

Neville did not wait to be asked twice.



Sirius bent his shaggy head so that his lips almost touched the porcelain shell of her ear.

"Smooth Operator,' hmm?"

Sophronia tilted her head and treated him to a provocative look from the corner of her eye.

"That's what they call men who leave a trail of broken hearts in their wake," she said.

Sirius held her more tightly and she moved willingly closer.

"Have you forgotten that summer in London? Who left whom?" he asked huskily.

Sirius watched the flush that rose to her cheeks and simultaneously spread down her throat. Circe, but she was *beautiful*.



“Papa called me home. I was to be married.”

“To some old man in Belgium!”

“To Sandoval Snape, Sirius — Severus’ father. I told you it was Belgium so you wouldn’t follow me to Hampshire.” She added, after a moment, “And there was the little matter of Lily Evans.”

“I never fancied Lily!” he protested.

Sophronia gave him a doubtful look.

“I didn’t! That was for James! He was crazy for her and she refused to go out with him. I was just supposed to get her to the Park when James was going to be there!”

Now she looked indignant. “So, you kissed her to keep her there until James Potter arrived?”

“Yes!”

“Three times?”

Grey eyes met blue and there was a moment when victory hung in the balance. Then Sirius closed his eyes and shook his head, causing the fringe to fall again into his eyes.

“I was an idiot, Sophie.”

She stroked the hair away from his face. “You were sixteen, Siri.”

He smiled at her crookedly. “I never thought I’d hear *that* name again.”

Sophronia’s thoughtful gaze fell upon Shadow and Ronald Weasley; Shadow nestled against the broad chest

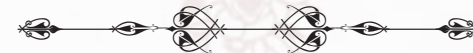
of her cavalier, while Ron handled her as if she were a china doll. How many dances had the two of them stolen together, tonight? Sophronia had been like a teenager herself, completely bound up in her own little world and oblivious to the behaviour of her daughters.

“Two years is a big gap in age, when you’re sixteen,” she murmured.

“Thirteen months,” Sirius responded automatically, falling back into an argument they had thrashed out many times in their school days.

Sophronia placed a finger across his lips. “We were just too young, Siri. It was the wrong time for us.”

As they danced on, the look of determination which crossed his face spoke volumes.



Lucius danced mechanically with the pretty Varen Vector; his attention was riveted upon his — *his* — Sophronia and that Azkaban-bait, Black. It was all he could do to refrain from cursing aloud when Sophronia directed such a coquettish look at the mutt. In all his weeks of carefully plotted courtship, she had never so much as *flirted* with him. Now, Black was pulling her close and she was going to him without demur. When she ran a hand through the mangy fur, Lucius snarled; when she pressed a finger

across the doggy lips, he audibly ground his teeth.

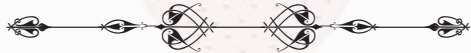
He was recalled to the presence of his partner when she slid one hand from his shoulder blade to his bum, and then back up again.

“You’re much too tense, Lucius,” Varen said with a wry smile. “I could help you with that.”

The long-suppressed libido rushed to take over the management of the brain.

“Could you?” he inquired with an amused quirk of his brow.

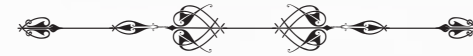
“Oh, yes,” Varen replied, showing him bedroom eyes.



Snape looked down at Hermione; her eyes were closed, her lips were slightly parted, the swell of her breasts pressed lightly against his chest. Beneath his fingertips, the silk of the flame-coloured gown begged to be stroked. He was entirely unconscious of the motion of his fingers, moving in steady, concentric circles against the fabric on her back. The jazz music, the sultry quality of the contralto voice, wove into the moment, as the strawberry-plus-essence-of-almond scent beguiled him from smell to the point of taste.

All of his senses were fully engaged. The moment was perfect.

Or — could it be? — that *Hermione* was perfect?



Almost against her will, Hermione let her eyes flutter open as the refrain of the song repeated for the last time. Snape was watching her guardedly. She looked into his face with simple curiosity; in the space of one song, she had moved from wariness to trust. She had forgotten her wish to make a lasting impression on him; she had been too busy enjoying the impact he was having on her. The niggling notion that had been teasing her infused her with a certainty: Severus Snape was her ideal. Intelligent and elegant, lithe and lean, honourable and heroic, disturbingly attractive — he was everything she wanted, all in one man.

As this surety settled like a weight in her heart, the song ended and their dance came to a halt. For a moment, they stood in the attitude of the dance, hands clasped, arms about one another; Snape opened his mouth to speak and Hermione’s heart stopped as she waited to discover what the next moment would bring. Would he push her away with his sneering, wounding words? Would he acknowledge what had occurred between them in the moment past?

Then he jerked his head to one side, his attention suddenly and irrevocably torn from her.

“Val,” he spat, as if it were a disgusting swearword.

“Sir?” she said, tentatively.



Snape released her and bowed stiffly. "Thank you for the dance, Miss Granger," he said. Then he turned on his heel and strode off the dance floor, into the crowd near the dais, and out of her sight.

"Now you shall waltz with me!"

Hermione felt as if she were awaking from a fantastical dream to a flat reality; the colours were less sharp, the lines were less distinct, and standing before her was Percy Weasley, rubbing his hands together with a somewhat repellent enthusiasm.

"If I must," she murmured to herself, and Percy gleefully took her slack hand in his and placed his other hand correctly at her waist. Hermione, however, kept looking at the spot where Snape had disappeared from view.



Luna crouched by the side of Val Delacour as he drained the glass of punch in his hand. She had offered to help him, and he had simply asked her to stay with him. She was perfectly happy to help him, since he was feeling sick, but she really did not see how having her kneel at his side could possibly assist him in any way.

"Are you feeling better?" she asked him solicitously.

Val let the punch glass clatter onto the table beside his chair and leered at her. "You're a pretty girl; I'll bet all the



blokes are after you."

Luna stood abruptly, a look of involuntary distaste crossing her features. "My partner is waiting for me. I must go back to the ballroom."

Val lurched to his feet and put his hands on the bare skin of Luna's upper arms, as if to steady himself. "Could you help me over to that sofa?" he said, glancing to the opposite side of the small room. The palms of his hands were grasping the backs of her arms; his thumbs were pressing with some force on her outer arms, but his fingers were trapped between her inner arms and her sides. He flexed his fingers against her sides and with a grunt of hyperextension, the backs of his fingers made contact with her breasts. "Oh, yeah," he groaned, leaning forward and placing a sloppy kiss on the side of her neck. "Yeah, baby, so sweet."

Luna gasped her outrage and attempted to wrench her arms from his clasp, but he was too strong for her.

"Let me go!" she said angrily, reaching for her wand in its ornamental sheath at her waist.

"Oh no, you don't," Val chuckled, jerking the sheath from her waist with a violence that caused the fabric to tear. He cast the wand to the floor and kicked it, sending it skittering into a dark corner. "You know you want it," he breathed, looking her over once again. "Otherwise you wouldn't have come in here, now, would you?"



Without waiting for an answer, Val tightened his grip on her right arm and began to frogmarch her toward the sofa.

"You're one of his, aren't you?" he hissed in her ear as he forced her along.

Luna elbowed him viciously in the side, as panic began to rise. She wasn't afraid to duel with a man twice her size, but if she had to rely on her own physical strength against a man, she was in trouble. The music from the next room was playing so loudly that she knew she would not be heard even if she called out for help. Someone else would surely have asked Draco to dance by now; it was lady's choice, after all, and he would be the choice of all the girls, wouldn't he? So he wouldn't miss her, no one would notice she was gone for a while, and she did not know how long she could hold off a drunken Val Delacour.

Val cursed as Luna's sharp elbow made contact with his ribcage. "Wildcat," he snarled, shoving her from him with such force that she fell onto the sofa in a heap of arms, legs, and disarranged pink satin. He stood over her in a threatening posture and rubbed the sore spot on his side. Her towering beehive hairdo began to topple as pins were dislodged; the disarranged skirt of her dress showed him one of her shapely, slender legs, halfway up the thigh. Her chest rose and fell as she panted, partly from exertion and partly from panic. Her large, protuberant blue eyes were

wide with terror. She looked frightened and vulnerable.

Val's need grew in him as he saw her distress and smelled her fear. He began to lower himself to her, insinuating one knee between her thighs.

"You can fight me, baby, I don't mind," he told her as he pinned her wrists in one large hand. "It just makes it better, don't you think?" He pressed a slimy kiss to her mouth.

Luna felt her gorge rise and clenched her teeth, as much against that as against the disgusting, floppy tongue Val Delacour was attempting to thrust into her mouth. She twisted her face away from him, causing his mouth to fall upon her throat, which he promptly began to ravish. One of her legs he had pinned to the cushions with his hip, but the other leg was hanging off the side of the sofa. With a mighty heave, she swivelled her hips and lunged at his groin with her knee.

Val swore again and narrowly avoided the collision of Luna's kneecap with his bits.

"Spitfire!" he said, adjusting his body weight so that she could not move the lower portion of her body. "Tell me you want me. I know Snape doesn't let you get any, he keeps you locked up."

Luna felt tears of fury gathering in her eyes and despised herself for the weakness. Ginny wouldn't cry, she would fight. Hermione wouldn't cry, she would outsmart him. Tonks would never have let him get her wand. Luna had

fought against the Death Eaters with all three of her friends and they had walked away victorious; she would not be beaten by *this* pathetic excuse for a wizard.

"Where were you in the war, Val?" she panted, going completely slack under his attack.

"What?" Val raised his head from her throat and looked at her face. "I'll show you war, baby." He reached between their bodies, as if for the buttons of his trousers.

"Were you at home with your mum?" she said, imitating Draco's most condescending, venom-laced tone. "Or were you hiding in France?"

Val shoved himself away from her, an ugly expression distorting his face. "What do you mean by that, you little bitch?" he demanded.

DRACO MADE another circuit of the ballroom, politely declining the dance offers he received from girls he had known his entire life. Where was Luna? She had been right there, beside the dais, when he was announcing the lady's choice. Perhaps it was conceited of him, but he had

fully expected her to ask him to dance to *Smooth Operator*. She must have asked another bloke — but who? All of the Phoenix House males were accounted for; Sirius with Sophronia, Remus with Tonks, Harry with Ginny, Ron with Shadow, Seamus with Marietta Edgecomb, Neville with Pans — even Snape with Hermione.

But where was Luna?



As he and Ginny danced, Harry saw Draco making another lap around the ballroom. Why wasn't he dancing? And where was Luna? He surveyed the ballroom, but didn't see Luna. He had promised himself that he would look out for her, now that Malfoy had her in his sights, and he had gotten wrapped up in Ginny and forgotten all about Luna. Had some git lured her out into the rose garden?

As the song neared an end, Harry saw Draco exchange a few words with the Master of Ceremonies, who had accompanied the orchestra back onto the dais. Draco turned his head suddenly toward a curtained doorway, then all but ran toward it.

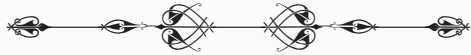
Before the last strains of the song had died away, Harry was leading Ginny off the floor.

"Sorry, Gin, I'll be back in a minute, okay?"

Ron and Shadow followed them from the dance floor and

Harry turned to Ron. "Come on," he said. "Luna's missing."

The two best friends strode to the doorway, with Ginny and Shadow on their heels.



Draco burst through the curtained doorway and took in the entire situation in a glance.

"*Expelliarmus!*" he intoned, stepping forward to catch the wand Val Delacour had been holding at Luna's throat. "Get off her, you scum."

Val looked over his shoulder at Draco, who was advancing into the small room like the wrath of God.

"Be a sport, old boy," Val enunciated in his best English. "I'll let you have seconds with her."

With a cry of fury, Luna shoved the body covering hers with all four of her extremities simultaneously. He was too heavy for her to move him very far, but Val was taken by surprise and he tumbled onto the floor.

"Thank you, Luna," Draco said politely. He pointed his wand at the man on the floor as Luna scrambled to her feet and backed away from her attacker; there was a loud BANG and then Draco was pointing his wand at a pure white ferret, shivering on the rug, right where Val Delacour had been.

"I've always wanted to do that," Draco said with deep satisfaction.



From the doorway, two voices spoke simultaneously.

"Brilliant!" Harry and Ron exulted.

Another two voices spoke simultaneously.

"Luna!" Ginny and Shadow cried.

The girls rushed to comfort their friend, as the boys advanced to admire Draco's handiwork.

"Awesome transfiguration, mate," Harry said.

"First rate!" Ron agreed.

Draco moved his wand up and down and the ferret began to bounce across the rug.

"Could you hold him for me?" Draco asked pleasantly, plunging his hand into his trousers pocket.

"Shall I wring his neck?" Harry inquired, holding the squealing ferret by its scruff.

"I would prefer if you did not, Mr. Potter."

Every eye in the room flew to the figure of Severus Snape as he entered. Draco, undeterred, popped the cap off the permanent marker Dean had given him and he drew a big black bull's eye on the ferret's white head.

"He was attacking Luna, Severus!" Shadow said, indignantly.

Snape approached the three girls and looked Luna over carefully, though he did not touch her.

"Are you hurt, Miss Lovegood?" he inquired gently. Luna looked up into his eyes and shook her head; taking the opportunity she afforded him, he delved delicately



into her memory. The vermin had touched her, but he had not raped her.

“No, Professor Snape — just angry.”

The ghost of a smile touched his lips. “Good girl,” he murmured, giving her a nod of approval. He turned his attention to Shadow. “Please fetch your mama to Miss Lovegood.”

“No!” Luna gasped.

Snape looked back to Luna and waited for her to speak. “Please, Professor, I don’t want *everyone* to know. Can’t I just sit in here with Ginny and Shadow for a while?”

Snape deliberated for a moment, then acquiesced. “Very well, Miss Lovegood. You will feel free to call upon Mrs. Snape or Professor McGonagall as needed?”

Luna nodded thankfully. “Yes, sir.”

Snape bowed to her respectfully and strolled over to join the three young men and the squirming ferret.

Draco looked Snape squarely in the face. “Let us handle it, sir. It would be awkward for you.”

Harry stepped up and stood shoulder to shoulder with Draco. “Luna is family to us, sir.” It was difficult, but he spoke the honorific without a trace of sarcasm. “It would be appropriate for us to deal with Delacour.”

Snape allowed his gaze to slip to Weasley, who nodded grimly in agreement with Potter, then looked back to Potter and Draco. He was very much in sympathy with them. Miss

Lovegood was a part of the inner circle of Dumbledore’s Army; she had fought with the other children and distinguished herself in battle. Additionally, her safety and security were *his* responsibility, and he had permitted his own convoluted affairs to place her in danger.

Snape closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Gentlemen, I am fully in accord with you,” he said, opening his eyes again and looking each of them in the eye, one after the other, as he spoke. “As a courtesy to me, I would ask that you permit me to handle this. I pledge my word that you will never again see Val Delacour on the shores of Britain. If you should do so, I will have no objection to any course of action you choose to take.”

Potter and Weasley looked mutinous, but Draco narrowed his eyes and considered Snape for a long moment.

“I trust you, sir,” Draco said, and handed the black-targeted ferret into Snape’s hands.

Snape efficiently emptied a decorative wicker basket full of roses and transfigured a carrier, then petrified the ferret and transferred it into the basket.

“May I rely upon you to inform Miss Delacour that I have been called unexpectedly to London, and that I will return late tonight? I will speak with her in the morning.”

Draco nodded and Snape strode out of the room, the handle of the transfigured animal carrier in his hand.

Ginny came up to the three young men and quietly addressed Draco. "Be very gentle with her, Draco," she said. "After an assault like that, girls can be nervous of men for a while."

Draco looked over to the sofa, where Shadow Snape was speaking to Luna in a calm voice and re-pinning her hair. "Would she like to go up to bed? We could have McGonagall or Sophronia go with her."

Ginny shook her head. "She says she doesn't want everyone to know what happened; she just wants to go back to the party." Ginny touched Draco on the arm. "She needs to know you don't think less of her for what happened, and the sooner the better."

Draco immediately walked over to the girls on the couch; Harry looked at Ginny with a small smile. "You never stop amazing me, Gin. How do you know all that stuff?"

Ginny smiled up into the beloved green eyes. "Crisis counselling, after the war, at St. Mungo's. There were so many girls and women who had been assaulted as a part of Voldemort's campaign to make everyone just want to give up. I volunteered to help."

Harry put a hand to Ginny's face and she stood on tiptoe to kiss him. Ron gave a snort of disgust and went over to the couch.

Shadow finished repairing the little rip on the dress, where the sheath had been torn away, and sat back. "There you go, Luna, good as new."

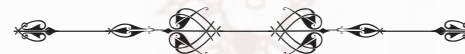
Luna stood and shook out her skirt. "Is it too rumbled?" "You look as pretty as you did when the evening began," Draco told her.

Ron sat down beside Shadow and began a whispered conversation with her as Draco stepped closer to Luna.

"Are you all right, love?" he asked tenderly. Luna turned her face up and Draco saw tears in her eyes. "Don't cry, Luna," he whispered. "I won't ever let him come near you again."

Luna gave a watery laugh. "I'm not crying about that, silly," she said, her eyes like stars. "You called me 'love.'"

McGonagall descended upon the three couples ten minutes later, scolding and shooing them back into the ballroom.



Hermione stood in the entrance hall with Lupin and Sirius as they made plans for a trip to the zoo later in the week. Tonks was loitering about, watching them surreptitiously. Hermione stepped up to Lupin and hissed, "Kiss my hand — passionately."

Sirius looked on in amusement as Lupin obeyed Hermione's command.

"Good night, Hermione," he said huskily, raising her hand to his lips. At the last moment, he turned her hand and pressed the kiss intimately to her inner wrist.

“Nice work, Moony,” Sirius muttered, watching Tonks growl and flounce up the grand staircase.

Lupin watched her go, longingly.

“Is this working, Hermione?” he asked.

“Oh, yes, Remus. Very soon, now,” she promised. “Good night!”



Snape Apparated to the Delacours' home in London, with the caged ferret in tow. His late arrival brought both François and Hélène Delacour to the parlour. Snape politely, but adamantly, insisted upon speaking to François alone.

The interview was not a happy one. With some urging, Snape's future father-in-law finally admitted that Val had been put out of two universities for his inability to control himself with young witches. François pled, but Snape was unyielding. Val was to be sent out of the country, into whatever accommodations Monsieur Delacour could arrange for his only son.

“Please do not take this lightly, monsieur,” Snape said implacably. “If I see your son again, he will go to Azkaban. He is never to be brought into the presence of myself, or my family, again. He will not attend my wedding. Is that perfectly clear to you? I do not wish for there to be any misunderstanding.” Snape leaned forward and his eyes

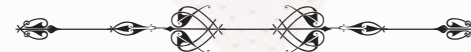


bore into those of Fleur's father. “There were three young men tonight who would have torn your son from limb to limb and scattered his bits to the four winds if I had not intervened on your behalf. I will never do so again.”

Monsieur Delacour finally agreed to Snape's terms, and the wicker carrier was thrust into his waiting hands.

“But what about this great black circle on his head?”

Snape paused in the doorway and looked back at the older wizard with a vicious sneer. “If some astute hunter does not do the world a favour by putting a crossbow bolt through his brain, it will eventually wear off.”



Snape Apparated back to Malfoy Manor in the company of his own sombre thoughts. The house was dark as he arrived, but there was another person at the Apparition point. Snape had his wand in his hand immediately.

“Identify yourself,” he snarled.

“Severus, *no!*” a laughing voice implored him.

“Varen?”

She stepped into the light of his wand tip, her hair in disarray and her cloak clutched about her.

“Leaving the Ravenclaw girls all alone tonight?” he asked.

“Sinistra is with them,” she answered easily. “A girl needs some fun, Severus.”

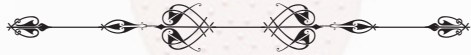


He snorted. "You realize he has every intention of marrying Sophronia?"

Varen shrugged philosophically. "But does she have every intention of marrying him? She was hanging on Sirius Black tonight as if *she* didn't know any better." She gave him a shrewd look. "Been out tomcatting yourself, tonight?"

Snape glared. "Go home, Varen."

An infectious chuckle floated to him just before she turned on the spot, and was gone.



Snape allowed himself a sigh of relief as he settled back on the pillows with his book in his hand. The headache, which had begun as he bargained with Draco and Company for Val Delacour's worthless life, was pounding in earnest now. The table before the windows held a bottle of Lucius' good brandy; a judicious measure of brandy might enable him to sleep for a few hours, but it was no guarantee.

If he could just find some solitude for a short period of time, he could compose himself and would be able to meet the new day with equanimity.

He started as his bedroom door was pushed open and a vision in white appeared. His wand was in his hand, poised for use, but he did not strike; at first, he believed he was seeing a ghost.



In the next moment, Fleur stepped into the circle of light cast by the lamp on his bedside table. She wore a negligee in diaphanous white; the robe of the ensemble was thrown open, displaying the plunging neckline of the gown. The material was of such filmy stuff that though the garment covered her body, it concealed nothing. Plainly visible to his eye was the shape of her pert breasts, the darker definition of her nipples, and the carefully trimmed patch of silvery curls below her navel.

If there was a flaw to detract from the classical perfection of her unveiled form, it was hidden from Snape's eye.

She stood for a moment at the foot of his bed, then she seemed to float toward him.

"Darling," she purred, seating herself on the edge of the bed beside him, "where did you go? I missed you."

Snape sat, dumbstruck, clutching his book tightly with both hands. His mouth was dry, the migraine had progressed from pounding pain to flashing lights in the periphery of his vision, he was uncomfortably hard, and his brain was shouting, "Yes! Do it! Yes! Do it!"

When he did not immediately answer her, Fleur leaned toward him, stroking the black curtain of hair back from his face on the near side and looking at him intently.

"Are you ill, Severus?" she whispered, moving closer still and acting as if she were going to feel his forehead for fever.



“You don’t look well.” When he did not jerk away from her, she pressed a kiss to his forehead, then his cheek, then his mouth. Her tongue lightly caressed the crease between his lips; as she did, Snape reflexively parted his lips and she dipped her tongue into his mouth, teasing.

Snape let the book drop from his hands onto the duvet; he was in the act of reaching for her, this woman who was to be his wife, who was offering herself to him, freely, for the taking — her perfume washed over him, a heavy, sickly-sweet, flowery cologne — and his hands pushed her from him as he exited the bed on the other side and threw his dressing gown over the pyjama pants he wore.

“Sev-er-us!” Fleur enunciated, shocked.

Snape cinched the belt of his robe and spoke for the first time since she entered the room.

“What do you mean by coming to my room dressed like that?”

Fleur pouted at him. “I would think my reason would be obvious, Severus.”

His lip curled. “If I were interested in this type of behaviour, madam, I could purchase it in Knockturn Alley.”

Fleur surged to her feet irately. “How dare you compare me, your affianced wife, to some paid prostitute?”

Snape replied evenly, “How dare you, my affianced wife, appear in public last night in that whore’s get-up you called an evening gown?”

“I was beautiful last night! The men could not keep their eyes off of me!”

“You looked like a fancy-piece. The men were wondering what your hourly rates are.”

She flew at him, then, coming around the end of the bed; he met her halfway, catching her wrists as she attempted to claw at him.

“Calm yourself,” he said to her in tones so fatigued that she was startled into silence.

Anger, she expected; passion, she hoped for — but weary resignation was not part of her plan. She stood, quiescent, until he released her.

Snape walked to the door and opened it. “Tonight is not the time to discuss anything of importance,” he told her. “We can speak, if you wish, tomorrow. For now, I must sleep.”

Fleur left the room without answering him.



Hermione admired the lovely old cherry wood table in the Malfoy kitchen. An alarmed house-elf had begged to serve her, but she had kindly sent him back to bed and warmed her own milk for cocoa. It was coming on four o’clock in the morning, but she had been unable to sleep. Her mind was in turmoil. Perhaps a warm drink would calm her thoughts enough for slumber.

"I hope you warmed enough for two."

It can be laid at the door of her femininity that Hermione's first thoughts went to her hair and her clothes. The pins had been removed from her hair, but she had made no effort to wrestle it into a plait, or to tidy it. She had not expected to meet anyone she might wish to impress, so she had simply pulled on her favourite oversized tee-shirt over her camisole and pyjama bottoms; on her feet were her warm bunny slippers.

So much for faerie silk elegance.

She turned from the stove and saw Professor Snape lounging in the doorway as if the doorjamb were holding him erect. His feet were bare; he wore a black satin dressing gown and green pyjama bottoms. The vee at the top of the dressing gown showed more of his flesh than she had ever seen before. Forcing her eyes up to his, she found him with one wicked eyebrow raised, one side of his mouth quirked, and amusement in his eyes.

Hermione smiled at him.

"Yes, I did warm enough for two cups," she said, reaching for another ceramic mug from the shelf. "Have a seat."

Snape slipped into the chair and watched as she efficiently stirred up two cups of cocoa. Just as he had hoped, when she bent to place his mug before him, he was flooded with her scent, and the memory of Fleur's heavy perfume was washed from his mind.

After giving him his cocoa, her courage failed, and she stayed on her feet. "I'll just take this cup back up to my room," she murmured, beginning to back out of the kitchen.

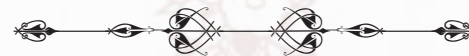
Acting as if she had not spoken, Snape said, "Do you read philosophy, Miss Granger?"

Hermione cocked her head to one side. "I have read some philosophers, sir. Which ones did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking of Kierkegaard and Hegel," he admitted, watching her from behind the curtain of his hair.

"Kierkegaard *loathed* Hegel!" Hermione exclaimed, placing her mug on the table and seating herself.

Snape gave her a smug smile and sipped his cocoa. "Now, what makes you say that?"



Fleur allowed the quarter hour to chime four forty-five before she interrupted them. She would not have ventured out of her room again if she had not heard Severus pass by. He was talking to Granger about nothing more important than the immensely boring subject of Hegelianism, whatever *that* was. She did not see how such a conversation could bring them romantically close, but she was determined to exercise some control in this situation.

If she could not bind him to her in fact, she could do so in Granger's mind, and that would do, for now.

Snape and Hermione were deep in conversation, he lounging back, with a half-smile playing on his lips, while she leant toward him earnestly, gesticulating as she spoke. There was the creaking of a board in the hall, then Fleur glided into the kitchen, wearing her transparent negligee, and went straight to Snape, bending over and kissing his lips.

"I woke up and you were gone," she said to him, just loudly enough for Granger to hear her.

Hermione shot to her feet, upsetting her mug, which was already empty. "I must get to bed — it's so late." She stared for a moment at the spectacle of her ideal with a nearly-naked veela draped around his neck, then fled the room without another word.

Despairing, Snape watched her go.

HERMIONE RACED up the staircase from the kitchen of the Malfoy house to the floor where her room was located. Her cheeks were still burning from the distress of seeing Fleur Delacour, obviously fresh from her fiancé's bed, kissing and caressing the man

Hermione was coming to view as essential to her happiness. And he had sat there, at the table where he and Hermione had just spent a stimulating hour in the give and take of intellectual discussion, and allowed the veela to manhandle him without so much as a demur.

Quietly, she entered the bedchamber which she shared with Alicia, relieved to find that her roommate was already soundly sleeping. Hermione moved to the chairs before the unshuttered windows and seated herself in a squasy armchair, staring out into the blackness of the night. As she sat there, she could not forestall the memories that came to her of October, the year before, when she had been alone with Severus Snape...

October, 1997

Hermione swallowed the Sleeve Potion and pushed away from the table.

"Is it foul?" Ron asked sympathetically.

"Loathsome," she responded, popping a sherbet lemon into her mouth.

Harry hovered over her. "Don't go, Hermione," he said quietly. "I know it's terrible, not knowing — but don't go."

Hermione checked her watch. "I can Apparate to Diagon Alley and take Muggle transport from there. It's not so far, Harry."

“Dumbledore says that even Diagon Alley isn’t safe, now,” Ron reminded her.

“Ron,” she said, “your family are wizards. They know what’s at stake. And Harry doesn’t care what happens to the Dursleys. But I *love* my parents and they are not wizards — they have no idea what is going on now. I have to see them and warn them.”

Harry tried again. “I told you, Dumbledore has been planning this for years. He sent Aurors to put special wards on your home in our fifth year, after what happened at the Department of Mysteries.”

“Special wards didn’t protect Elphias Doge, Harry, did they? Or Dedalus Diggle! And they *are* — were — wizards. At least if Mum and Dad know there’s a war, they can decide what to do.” She finished on a little sob, and Harry and Ron quickly embraced her, from either side. Hermione gave a little chuckle. “It’s just the potion taking effect. See, I’m wearing my heart on my sleeve.” She looked at them, suddenly deadly serious. “Test me.”

Ron spoke up, all business. “Where is Dumbledore hiding Harry Potter?”

Hermione concentrated her mind and made an attempt to speak the words, “Harry Potter is at Hogwarts.”

She opened her mouth and said, sincerely, “I’ve always thought your pretty blue eyes are your nicest feature, Ron.”

Harry snorted and Ron gave him a filthy look. “Your turn, mate,” he said darkly.

“How does Dumbledore mean to defend Hogwarts?” Harry asked Hermione.

Forcing herself to focus her considerable brain power upon saying, “The students are carefully trained in defence and they will function as Dumbledore’s Army,” Hermione looked right into Harry’s face and replied, “I really need to have a pee.”

Then she blushed scarlet as the boys roared.

Hermione pulled the hood of her cloak forward so that more of her face was covered, and looked about her carefully. There were fewer people than usual, for a Saturday morning in Diagon Alley. It was a blustery autumn day, with dark clouds scudding across the sky and the wind whipping cloaks about the legs of the few pedestrians browsing the windows of the shops. Recently, Death Eater attacks had spread from Muggle villages to Muggle cities; in the past ten days, Wizarding homes had also been attacked. The Order of the Phoenix had lost two members: Dedalus Diggle and Elphias Doge, who had been killed in their own homes. Professor Snape had reported to the Order Planning Council that rumour amongst Voldemort’s followers indicated that the Order folk and their families and friends were being specifically targeted. Dumbledore still excluded Harry, Ron, and

Hermione from the meetings where strategy and tactics were discussed, but the kitchen at number twelve, Grimmauld Place was not proof against the latest generation of Extendable Ears which had recently been perfected by Fred and George Weasley. The joke shop owners were no longer at school, but they continued to be fierce supporters of Dumbledore's Army. Ever since they had flown away from Hogwarts in a blaze of glory, a feat which had since become legend, the indefatigable Weasley twins had been full-fledged members of the Order, as well. They were not, however, invited to join the Planning Council, so they made do with cleverly placed Extendable Ears and faithfully fed the information to Harry.

Hermione began to make her way down the flagged pathway, her face averted and her fingers firmly clasped about the wand in the pocket of her cloak. If her trip into London became known to the teachers at Hogwarts, she would be in serious trouble, but Hermione was past caring. No one understood how she felt, did they? Not even Harry and Ron could understand her *need* to see her parents and to make sure they were safe. She would never be able to live with herself if some harm came to them, and she had never made an effort to alert them to the danger they were in because of her.

Looking neither left nor right, Hermione made her way

into the Leaky Cauldron. There was a bit more of a crowd here; those who did not care to expose themselves to the nippy wind out on the street were quite content to huddle near the fire with a pint and whisper over the recent happenings. She slipped quietly through those standing near the bar, and wended her way through the tables to the door.

Her passing did not go unheeded by the pair in the darkest corner of the pub.

"That one is keeping herself covered up," the ugly wizard said to his companion.

"How do you know it's a bird?" came the bored reply.

The ugly wizard stood. "Have you ever seen a bloke walk like that?"

The indifferent wizard looked at his standing friend. "What?"

"Our instructions are to look for suspicious activity. Sneaking and lurking fall under that category. Come on."

"I haven't finished my pint!" The wizard still seated pulled his mug a bit closer. "It's just some female all bundled up against the wind, Mac — sit down, drink up."

Macnair fastened his dark Muggle-style coat and took another slug of Polyjuice Potion from his flask. "Stay if you want, Cliffe. I think I know who that is; I've been fancying a bit of a chat with her." His hand went unconsciously to his left eye. In his natural state, he wore a black patch on that

eye as the relic of a battle he had fought against a spotty lot of teenagers. *This* face belonged to some poor Muggle who had been murdered and shorn of his hair for future Polyjuice use. Old Snape had his uses; he certainly kept the Dark Lord supplied with useful potions. "I'll just tell our Lord you did not wish to leave your drink and the warm fire."

Cliffe looked down longingly at his all-but-untouched mug, then stood and shrugged into his Muggle coat as well. The last thing he needed was to get the Dark Lord riled. He brushed past Macnair and followed the hooded figure out of the pub into the gusty Muggle street.

Hermione boarded the bus along the Charing Cross Road, handing the Muggle money to the driver and moving quickly to the nearest seat. Directly behind her, a lady with two small children dragged on board, followed by a heavily-tattooed teen with headphones and two men in shabby overcoats who were whispering to one another — perhaps they were a couple? Hermione looked away from them and gazed out the window at the plethora of bookstores for which the area was famous. With a regretful sigh, she promised herself she would come back at her soonest opportunity and browse to her heart's content.



A mile from her parents' home, Hermione stepped



to the front of the bus and exited at the stop, stooping near the curb to tie her trainers. The whispering couple exited the bus behind her and nearly stumbled over her crouched form.

Muttering an excuse, the taller man stepped around her and walked away down the pavement, followed by his companion. At the last possible moment, just before the bus doors closed, Hermione scrambled back aboard, with a smile at the confused bus driver. She took another seat and watched the odd men turn as the bus began to move, staring after the bus as it drove away from them. Unable to resist the temptation, she waved once, good-bye.



Cliffe and Macnair watched the cheeky wench wave at them through the bus window as the vehicle moved away from them.


"Was she the one who took out your eye?" Cliffe said, his Polyjuiced face pinched with anger.

"No. But it was her wand."


"Damn shame she caught us out with that schoolboy's trick," Cliffe swore.

"The hell she did," Macnair answered, setting off with a purposeful stride. "Her parents live near here. If we can't get her coming, we'll get her going."






Hermione exited the bus at the stop past her parents' home, and began to backtrack. She never heard the whispered incantation that Stunned her. In the next moment, the two men she had apparently failed to outfox were on either side of her; the taller one took a firm grip on her upper arm, and they Apparated.



She did not know how long she had been confined in the small cell. She sat at a scarred wooden table in a tiny room with no windows. The floorboards were bare and the walls were unadorned. They had taken her wristwatch and her wand from her, but they had not harmed her. She had heard them speaking outside the locked door of the cell; they had been in and out several times, and she had seen who they were as the Polyjuice began to wear off. She did not know the other one's name, but the tall one was Macnair.


The Death Eaters had her, and no one knew. She was well and truly on her own.

Heavy footsteps were approaching down the wooden floorboards of the hallway outside of the cell. Swallowing the thick, coppery taste of fear, she took deep breaths in an effort to calm herself. The Sleeve Potion would remain in



effect for at least thirty-six hours from when she had swallowed it. Even if they gave her Veritaserum, it would only increase the efficacy of the Sleeve Potion. But after thirty-six hours, she would lose that protection and she would become able to tell the Order's secrets. Hermione would rather die than betray the Order or the DA. She was afraid, but she was prepared to do it, to die, if it would mean Harry would have the chance to destroy Voldemort.

Closing her eyes and continuing her deep, even breathing, Hermione began to contemplate how she might be able to bring about her own death, if need be.



Mulciber relaxed, at his ease, in the most comfortable armchair in the safe house. This cottage, set in a stand of trees off a country lane, was under his supervision. He had two subordinates assigned to him; it was their job to lurk in the Wizarding communities, disguised by Polyjuice Potion, and watch for leads that could bring them to Harry Potter, Albus Dumbledore, or the Order of the Phoenix. When the occasion arose, they would bring their detainees to this place for questioning. All information obtained was reported directly to the Dark Lord.

The Granger girl was a coup. They would obtain vital information from her and Mulciber's Master would be very

pleased. Mulciber would be rewarded; perhaps, he would be given the girl when his Master had no further need of her.

With a flick of his wand, the wall of the interrogation room became transparent and he watched Macnair questioning her.

“Let’s try again,” Macnair said in a threatening tone. “What is your name?”

“I don’t like you,” Hermione said. “And I don’t like your moustache; it has food in it,” she added.

Macnair slammed his fist onto the table so violently that the surface shook. “Do you imagine that we would *not* hurt you to find out what we want to know?” he thundered.

Hermione drew the sleeve of her shirt across her face. “You spit all over me, and your breath is horrible!” she complained.

Macnair strode to the door and threw it open. “Cliffe! Bring the potion.”

The younger Death Eater looked up. “Get it yourself,” he said.

Mulciber caught Cliffe’s eye. “Take the Veritaserum to Macnair.”

Grumbling, Cliffe stumped down the hallway into the kitchen, where a small store of potions were kept in a cupboard. Snatching up the tiny phial of colourless liquid, he took it to Macnair.



“Hold her,” Macnair ordered.

Hermione spoke up, her voice shaking. “There is no need to hold me. I’ll swallow it.”

Without speaking, Macnair conjured a cup of water to which he added three drops of the potion.

“Drink it or I’ll pour it down your throat,” he promised, holding out the cup.

Hermione did not respond to him, but took the cup and upended it into her mouth, grateful for the water. The Veritaserum had no taste. She replaced the cup on the table, her hand trembling with the fear she was trying to suppress.

Cliffe leant against the wall, watching.

“What is your name?” Macnair asked again.

“Talking to you is very boring,” Hermione answered.

“Where is the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix?” he continued.

“You are a mean person.” Her lip trembled involuntarily.

“Where is Harry Potter?”

“My favourite colour is *pink!*” she shouted.

“Answer me!” Macnair grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her like a rag doll.

“Macnair! Take your hands off her.”

Cliffe wisely backed out of the room as Mulciber entered, his wand in hand. Macnair released Hermione and she fell back into her seat, rubbing her bruised shoul-



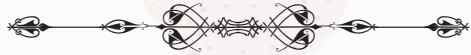
ders and fighting back sobs of terror.

Mulciber approached Hermione, circling the chair in which she sat, and pausing behind her. "After all," he murmured, "some people are known to be immune to Veritaserum. They are very rare, but it does happen. There are other ways to deal with prisoners who fail to be persuaded by the Truth Potion."

Hermione felt fear clutch at her heart as she swiftly turned in her seat to face the wizard behind her.

Mulciber smiled at her and levelled his wand.

"*Crucio!*"



The outer door of the Dark Lord's headquarters opened and cold wind preceded Lucius Malfoy into the room. Closing the door behind him, Malfoy ran an experienced hand through his platinum hair, tidying the disarray caused by the blustery conditions. Next, he unfastened the clasp of his fine woollen cape, flinging the garment onto an unoccupied armchair. At last, he turned his bored, patrician countenance upon his compatriots and looked each of them up and down before drawing, "What's toward?"

Wormtail sidled up to him. "Cliffe is with his Lordship; it appears that Mulciber's men grabbed Granger in Islington today."

Lucius frowned. "Granger?" He appeared to ponder for a mo-



ment. "You mean they have Potter's Muddblood? Oh, well done."

A door across the room opened and Cliffe appeared. "Malfoy — our Lord wishes to speak to you."

Lucius trod obediently into the darkened room and knelt before his Master. "How may I serve you, my Lord?"

Voldemort motioned for Lucius to rise; Malfoy stood at respectful attention, awaiting his orders.

"Mulciber's men have Potter's Muddblood, but she has not given any information under either Veritaserum or the Cruciatu Curse. I want you to send my Interrogator to her."

Lucius answered immediately, "Certainly, my Lord. Am I to have him leave off his questioning of the Auror, or shall I send him on after he has completed that task?"

"He must finish with the Auror first. The Muddblood is safely hidden." The Dark Lord turned his horrible, red-eyed face to Cliffe. "Inform Mulciber that my Interrogator will be with you when I can spare him."

Malfoy and Cliffe bowed their way out of the chamber and closed the door. With a practiced leer, Lucius inquired, "And is the Muddblood tasty?"

Cliffe shrugged. "Mulciber won't let us touch her. I think he's hoping our Lord will gift him with what's left of her when she is of no further use to us." A particularly unpleasant smile lit upon his bearded face. "She's young and it would be a pleasure to do my duty as a Death Eater,



if you know what I mean.”

For a moment, it seemed to Cliffe that Malfoy’s grey eyes blazed in an odd way. “I do indeed know what you mean. You had best get back to Mulciber so that he will know the Interrogator is coming.”

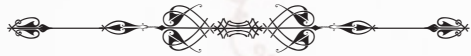
Cliffe knew very well that Malfoy was one of Lord Voldemort’s chief advisors; he nodded respectfully and left. Lucius retrieved his cloak and was fastening the clasp when Wormtail skulked out of the shadows.

“Where are you off to?”

Lucius looked imperiously down his nose at the low-life sycophant. “I am going to his Lordship’s Interrogator, Wormtail — unless, of course, you would care to go in my stead?”

A look of true fear passed over the rat-like face. “No, no, my Lord has need of me; I must stay close by...”

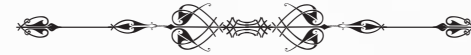
With grim satisfaction, Lucius watched Wormtail skitter away, back into the shadows. Then he strode out the door.



Lucius Apparated into a small room beneath Malfoy Manor. Removing the counterfeit Galleon from his pocket, he touched it with his wand and murmured an incantation. That chore completed, he moved to one of the two armchairs and poured a splash of brandy from the decanter on the small side table. With a look of determi-



nation, he settled back in his chair to wait.



Hermione regained consciousness slowly, with different parts of her body reporting in to her fuzzy mind. Every joint of her frame ached; with a sickening rush of bile, she remembered enduring the Cruciatus Curse until she fainted. Gritting her teeth against the impulse to vomit, she resolved not to move; she did not wish to alert her captors to her state of consciousness. Apparently, they had left her where she fell. As her mind cleared, she became aware that her knickers, jeans, and even her socks were wet. Dear God, her bladder had released at some point and she was lying in a pool of her own urine. Her face burned with shame at the thought of being seen this way by anyone.

She began to cry silently, and she lay unmoving on the hard floor, letting the scalding tears of humiliation and anger stream unchecked into her hair.



Lucius had just swallowed the last of his brandy when Snape Apparated into the underground room. Lucius leant forward and poured another goblet of brandy, offering it to him without a word.

Snape raised a quizzical eyebrow, but accepted the goblet



and disposed his long limbs in the second armchair.

"I had understood we were to use the coins to contact one another in case of emergency — not for invitations to pop over for a drink," Snape murmured sardonically, taking a sip of the fine old brandy.

"They have Granger, Severus," Lucius stated.

Snape snorted. "Don't be ridiculous. When I left Hogwarts, the Dumbledore's Army poppets were practicing their defence spells in the Room of Requirement. Even *Draco* was in attendance." Snape darted a slightly malicious sneer at Lucius from behind the curtain of his stringy, rain-wet hair. To his mild disappointment, Lucius failed to notice the taunt.

"Did you see her with your own eyes, Severus?" Lucius tipped more brandy into his goblet. "It is of no importance to me if you wish to sacrifice the little witch to the Dark Lord, but would Dumbledore agree with you?"

Snape slapped the goblet down onto the table. "You're serious!"

Lucius' lips thinned. "Mulciber has her. Cliffe says she has not yet been defiled, but that Mulciber hopes to receive her as his reward for whatever information they can obtain from her. They have used Veritaserum on her, as well as the Cruciatus, but she has not even given them her name."

Snape was on his feet, teeth clenched and bared in a

snarl. "The Sleeve Potion," he spat.

Malfoy's eyebrows drew up. "I beg your pardon?"

Snape waved him off. "Granger's Independent Study project. What else do I need to know?"

Lucius stood also, fastening his cloak. "At this very moment, I am thought to be with my Lord's special Interrogator, imparting information regarding the whereabouts of Miss Granger. His Lordship has given permission for *all measures necessary* to be used to break her."

Snape swore violently. "Mulciber's safe house?"

Lucius was only halfway through his nod when Snape Disappeared. With a regretful glance at the wasted brandy, Lucius turned on the spot, and was also gone.



Mulciber, Macnair, and Cliffe looked up in some surprise as the door to the safe house opened and Severus Snape swept into the room, banging the door closed behind him.

"What are you doing here?" Cliffe demanded with every sign of loathing.

Snape walked past the foot soldier without a word. "Are you permitting the raw recruits to speak in your presence?" his inquired insolently, looking down at Mulciber with a haughty sneer. "How very democratic of you."

Mulciber flushed angrily and said, "What are you doing

here, Snape?”

Snape glanced over at the third occupant of the room; Macnair was seated at a table littered with coffee cups, biscuit tins, and overflowing ashtrays. Snape nodded to him, saying evenly, “Walden.”

Macnair returned the nod and grunted.

“May I?” Snape inquired politely.

Macnair waved to a chair and watched as Voldemort’s Potions master divested himself of his damp cloak and pulled a flask from an inner pocket. Voldemort’s soldiers were forbidden to drink spirits when on duty, but Macnair eyed the liquid greedily.

Snape pulled a cup to himself and gave it a tap with his wand; it now looked as if it had just been washed. He poured a judicious slug of firewhisky into the cup. “Nothing like a sip of spirits to warm one up on a wet and windy day,” he commented.

Macnair dumped the contents of his cup into a saucer and offered it for Snape to pour firewhisky for him. Mulciber rose and joined them at the table to receive his share, all animosity forgotten in anticipation of a warming drink.

Snape glanced over at Cliffe, who was pouting in the corner. “Come, Mr. Cliffe. It does you no credit in the eyes of your superiors to be sullen when invited to partake of refreshments as if you were their equal.” His voice took on

its teaching authority as he ordered, “*Get over here.*”

Instinctively obeying his former Head of House, Cliffe hastened to the table and thankfully accepted the slightly grimy cup he was given, caring only that the firewhisky within would warm him.

Snape held his cup at chest level. “To the Dark Lord,” he intoned, knowing that not one of his companions could fail to drink to such a toast.

The four cups touched and each of the Death Eaters, including Snape, tossed back the contents.

Snape felt a stab of victory; the Confusing and Befuddlement Draught would take effect within thirty minutes.

“Now,” he said, “I am here because of the Dark Lord’s concern that the captive failed to respond under *Veritaserum*. Is that correct?”

Mulciber sneered. “She’s one of yours, Snape — Potter’s Mudblood tart.”

Snape cast Mulciber a look of derision. “Exactly *how* is that pertinent to this conversation?”

Mulciber waved his wand and the wall into the holding cell became transparent. “See?” he jeered. “She still hasn’t woken from her bout with the *Cruciatus*.”

Snape glanced into the next room, his gaunt face impassive. Granger lay crumpled on the floor like a broken doll.

“Good God, man, have I been sent out here on a fool’s

errand? The girl looks dead!" He infused his voice with snide indifference.

"She's not dead," Macnair said. "I checked."

Cliffe snorted. "Stuck your hand right down her blouse to check that out, did you?"

In a flash, Snape held a wand at the younger wizard's throat.

"You have been invited to sit with your betters," he growled, his voice low. "You will keep your foolish mouth *shut* unless you are spoken to. Is that perfectly clear?"

Cliffe nodded and lapsed again into belligerent silence.

Snape sheathed the wand and stood. "Let me see her wand," he commanded.

Macnair stirred, but Mulciber stayed him with a gesture. "Why do you need to see her wand?" he asked suspiciously.

Snape sighed gustily. With an exaggerated show of patience, he explained, "I need to see what the core of the wand is. It may have some bearing on what type of potion I can brew to force her to tell the truth."

Macnair glanced inquiringly at Mulciber, who shrugged. "Show him," he said.

Macnair walked to the cupboard in the corner and opened it to retrieve the vine wood wand. Snape waved it once, producing silvery sparks and an audible moan from the girl in the next room. Ignoring the sound, he placed the wand on the cupboard shelf and closed the cupboard door again.



"I'll go in to her now," he said, waving his own wand at the wall, which immediately became solid again.

"Do you need *privacy* to speak to the little slag?" Mulciber asked scornfully.

Snape cast him a look of disgust. "My reasons are my own, Mulciber. Never fear; I will do nothing to dampen her — enthusiasm — for your further attentions."

Snape entered the cell and cast a swift Silencing Charm. From his trousers pocket he pulled a tiny phial of antidote to the Confusing and Befuddlement Draught; he swallowed the bitter liquid and replaced the phial. Standing across the room from her, Snape said, "Miss Granger."

Hearing the familiar voice, Hermione stirred. "Professor? Don't look at me; I'm so filthy." Her voice trembled on a sob.

With an impatient imprecation, Snape strode across the room and pointed his wand at her. "*Tergeo!*"

Hermione looked up at him pathetically. "That was so *sweet* of you!"

Snape rolled his eyes. "Get up and sit in a chair," he snapped. "I distinctly remember telling you *not* to use that damned potion!"

"I'm so sorry to be so much trouble, Professor," she said sincerely.

"Shut up and listen to me, Miss Granger; we don't have much time."



Obedying her teacher by instinct, Hermione gave him her attention.

“In fifteen minutes or so, there will be a diversion outside of the house. You will hear it when it happens.” He passed to her the wand he had used since his arrival. “*Alohomora* will get you out of this room. When you hear the commotion, go into the next room and put them each in a Full Body Bind. They will be confused and their reaction time will be slowed. I need them conscious — do you understand me?”

“Yes, Professor, I can always understand you — you speak so clearly and your voice is so *sexy*,” Hermione assured him earnestly.

Snape swore. “When we get back to Hogwarts you will surrender to me every phial of that preposterous potion and I am going to destroy them!” He ground his teeth. “And incinerate the recipe!”

Hermione sat as still as a stone, her lower lip clamped between her teeth, waiting for the storm to pass.

Controlling his temper, Snape continued, “After you put them in the Full Body Bind, retrieve your own wand from the cupboard in the corner; I left it in plain sight. As you go out the door, I want you to shout Potter’s and Weasley’s names, as if they were come to rescue you. Then go straight ahead, through this copse, across the field, and into the woods beyond. If I am not there when you arrive, *wait* for me.” Snape

leant towards her until his nose was mere inches from her own. “No matter what you do, Miss Granger, do *not* do any magic with your own wand. Be absolutely certain that you bring this spare wand back out with you. Are we clear?”

Hermione nodded. “I know what you want me to do, but I can’t repeat it back to you.”

Snape nodded tersely; as the director of her Independent Study project, he knew very well what the effects of the Sleeve Potion were.

“In a moment, I will ask you to take the Silencing Charm down. When that is done, I want you to scream something angrily so they will believe you are upset to learn of my affiliation with the Dark Lord. Be ready to act; time is of the essence.”

“But why, Professor?”

“There is someone coming here whom you do *not* wish to meet, Miss Granger. The Dark Lord’s ‘special’ Interrogator is a deeply horrible person. No more questions.”

At his gesture, Hermione took the Silencing Charm down, then she screeched, “I trusted you! I trusted you and look at what you’ve done!”

Snape roared back at her in a tone so malevolent that she cowered in her chair.

“Shut up, shut *up*, you stupid Mudblood bitch!”

And with that he slammed out of the cell door.

Mulciber, Macnair, and Cliffe surveyed him with smug expressions.

"I told you she was impossible to question," Mulciber said.

Snape ignored them, putting on his dark cloak again. "I must go to my laboratory and see what I can concoct as an aid to interrogation. Good night."

He was gone out the door in a swirl of dark robes.

Cliffe stared after him resentfully. "How does he make his clothes *do that*?" he wondered out loud.

When the explosion came, ten minutes later, the concussion knocked them all to the floor.

Hermione promptly shoved herself to her feet, blasted her way out the door, and turned the wand on her three tormentors, who lay senseless upon the floor. It was the work of less than one minute to put each of them in a Full Body Bind; then she stepped over them, being none too particular about where she placed her feet, to retrieve her own wand and her watch from the cupboard.

Mindful of her instructions, Hermione threw the front door open and cried, "Ron! Harry! I knew you'd come!" Then she walked out the door and found Professor Snape

racing towards her.

"Give me the spare wand, then do as I told you and go across the field into the woods."

She opened her mouth but he forestalled her. "*Now*, Miss Granger. The Death Eaters are coming!"

Without another word of argument, Hermione ran into the field in the fading twilight, heading for the woods.

By the time Snape joined her, the intermittent rain which had been falling all day began to come down in torrents.

"We can Apparate to the gates of Hogwarts!" Hermione said, leaning close so that he could hear her.

Snape grabbed her hand and headed deeper into the trees, speaking in panting sentences as they moved. "Any Apparition we do can be followed; they will be right behind us. Any magic we do can be traced directly back to our own wands. As of twenty minutes ago, *you* are no longer here, having been snatched away by Potter and Weasley; none of this must be traced back to me, or my usefulness as a spy for the Order will be over."

Hermione yanked her hand away from him and stopped, shoving her mass of wet hair out of her face. "Then how are going to get home?"

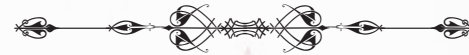
With a snarl, Snape grabbed her other hand. "We're

spending the night together in these woods, Miss Granger," he snapped unpleasantly, beginning once again to pull her through the trees.

SNAPE WEARILY closed the door of his allotted bedroom at Malfoy Manor and looked longingly at his rumpled sheets. How his body longed for sleep; how his mind longed for respite from the turmoil of his thoughts. Watching Granger's flight from the kitchen had been very nearly as educational as the expression on Fleur's face as she watched Granger go. Snape ran a tight ship, when it came to his life. Acceptable thoughts were arranged in proper categories, unacceptable thoughts were forced into an internal oubliette and forgotten, and emotions were strictly controlled and absolutely regulated. Days such as the one just past, with all its attendant drama, tended to disrupt self-discipline.

Admitting to himself that sleep was unlikely to come to him before the encroaching dawn of the new day, he seated himself at the small

table before the unshuttered window and poured a goblet of Lucius' good brandy. Gazing out into the black night, alone with his thoughts, he allowed himself to remember another late night conversation with Hermione Granger...



October, 1997

Hermione sat on the wooden floor of the old building and shivered. She was soaked to the skin after her flight through the woods in the torrential rainfall with Professor Snape. Though it was not yet winter, the rain and wind served to make it quite cold in the unheated room. She stole a longing look at the empty stone fireplace, imagining it illuminated by a roaring fire. She knew it was not to be; Professor Snape had made it quite clear to her that they were not to use any magic, for fear of detection. The disturbance at the safe house supervised by Mulciber would be detected by the Dark Lord, and his minions would be scouring the countryside for signs of their prisoner and her rescuers.

Professor Snape had entered the safe house after Hermione had fled, and he had modified the memories of the three Death Eaters. They would have no recollection of Snape's presence in the house that day, but they would have a firmly held belief that Hermione had been

freed by members of the Order of the Phoenix — specifically, Harry and Ron.

“But what about the spells we cast while we were in the safe house?” she had asked him.

Snape produced the spare wand he had passed her in the interrogation room. “This is what the Magical Law Enforcement and the Auror Offices refer to as a ‘throw down’ wand. It is unregistered and untraceable.”

Hermione goggled at him. “But that’s illegal! I can’t believe you would do something illegal, even if you *are* a spy!”

Snape stowed the wand again in his cloak. She did not seem to be capable of preventing herself from blurting out whatever crossed her mind; he knew it was the effect of the Sleeve Potion she had ingested, but it was going to be a chore to put up with her for the rest of the night. Why had he not thought to bring a phial of Dreamless Sleep? It would have spared him the necessity of dealing with her in this state.

After a moment, he said shortly, “Be thankful, girl.” Then he had gone to prowl around the building.

Hermione shifted her position on the uneven wooden flooring and tried to ignore the growling of her stomach. It had to be well past her usual dinner time; she had not eaten since breakfast that morning in the Great Hall.

Containing a sigh, she leant back against the wooden wall behind her and closed her eyes.

Snape made a circuit around the hovel he had chosen for his hidey-hole. Years of espionage experience had taught him to have alternative plans for every contingency imaginable. He had scouted out hiding places in the vicinity of each of the Dark Lord’s instalments. This shelter was one of the most squalid places he had chosen. Admittedly, he had never meant to bring a second person to this location, but he felt he had been rather short-sighted and meant to mend the matter as soon as possible. When dealing with Potter and Company, last-minute rescues could easily become the order of the day, rather than the exception.

It appeared that the derelict old building had once been a hunting box for some person who enjoyed coming into the country for shooting. The lean-to shed contained the detritus of a seldom-used holiday retreat; he was relieved to find two colourful plastic buckets of the type used by Muggle children stored there. The rain could be caught in the buckets and used for drinking. There was a bathroom in the old shack, filled with rusted pipes and stained porcelain. Amazingly, the cistern still held water, though no water came through the taps. The toilet, then, was operational, and could be flushed with water from one of the buckets. Merlin knew that females could never

hold their water for very long; a working toilet would be a major problem solved.

Snape paused for a moment beneath the overhang of the eave of the porch. He knew that the next twelve hours would be dangerous, for more than one reason. Not only did he have to keep Granger safe from the Death Eaters who would be searching for her, he had to find a way to keep her safe from herself. The potion which she had ingested early that morning would be functional until the next day at this time. She was under the influence of a mixture of ingredients that caused her to voice her thoughts without censure. It was his goal to get through the night, by whatever means necessary, without having an hysterical teenage girl on his hands. Resolve made, he took a deep breath and entered the cabin.



Hermione opened her eyes when she heard him come in. She made a movement, as if to rise, but he forestalled her with a gesture.

“Are you cold?”

She nodded. “Freezing.”

Snape removed his heavy cloak, his robes, and then began unbuttoning his coat. Hermione watched him, mesmerized. She had never before seen him without the layers of



black clothing he habitually wore. Whatever was he *doing*?

Snape finished unbuttoning the coat and shrugged it off. “Take these,” he said, holding the coat and robes out to her, “and go into the bathroom. Remove all of your wet clothing and put on the robes and button them all the way up, then put the coat on. You will warm up more quickly if you are not wearing wet things. Unfortunately, I do not have anything to offer you to replace your jeans.”

Hermione stood and took the coat, frankly staring at him as he stood in his fine white linen shirt, black trousers, and black boots. “Why aren’t you wet like I am?”

He gave her a sour look. “I thought to put a water-repelling charm on my cloak before I set out on this expedition. It is a pity that you did not think to do the same.”

Accepting the rebuff stoically, Hermione remained where she was, worrying at her lip. “I don’t see why you should have to give up your coat just because I didn’t think, sir,” she said.

Snape’s voice took on a well-practiced edge. He needed to be firm without setting off emotional fireworks. “Miss Granger, I will appreciate it very much if you will resist the everlasting urge to argue with me, and simply do as I ask you.” He gestured towards the bathroom. “The next twelve hours will pass much more agreeably if you will make the attempt.”



“Yes, Professor,” she said, and obediently headed for the bathroom.

Relieved to have cleared one hurdle, Snape fastened the woollen cloak once more about his throat and slipped his hand in the pocket, fingering the two chocolate bars hidden there. He tried to keep himself thus supplied, at all times. Chocolate had great restorative powers in regards to the Dark Arts; more importantly, a bar of Honeyduke’s finest chocolate could tide him over for hours if he were unable to partake of regular meals. Granger would not have any experience at going hungry, unlike Snape. He removed his hand from the pocket as he heard the bathroom door open.

Granger walked into the room, which was swiftly becoming dark within as the night darkened without. Though he could barely make her out, he could see that the sleeves of the robes and the coat both hung past her fingertips, and the bottom of the robes trailed in the dust on the rough, wooden floor. The coat came down to her knees; she looked like a little girl playing dress-up in her papa’s clothes. The wild mare’s nest of bushy brown hair bloomed about her head like a living organism; from beneath the hem of the robes peeked one pale toe.

“Sir?” she said, tentatively.

Snape shook himself from his reverie. “Are you warmer?”

She smiled at him tremulously. “I am certainly dryer,

and I hope that warmer will not be far behind,” she said.

“Are you hungry?” he inquired.

“Yes!”

He produced a bar of the Honeyduke’s chocolate and extended it to her. “See how long you can make it last, Miss Granger; it is the only bar I can spare for you.”

Hermione took the bar with a reverence reserved only for books and chocolate. “Thank you, Professor Snape!” She looked up at him searchingly. “Where is yours, sir?”

“I am not hungry. I will eat mine later.” He gestured to the spot where she had been sitting before. “You should sit down and wrap your feet in the excess fabric of the robes to keep them warm.”

Hermione sat down, never taking her eyes from him. “But what are you going to do?” she asked quietly.

Snape raised an imperious eyebrow. “What did we agree about you constantly questioning me?”

Hermione’s eyes dropped to the candy bar, clutched in her hands. In a tiny voice, she said, “I’m sorry, sir. I’ll be quiet.”

Without encouraging her to speak again, Snape went back out the door, onto the porch. The rain was continuing to fall steadily; combined with the brisk, biting wind, it made for miserably cold conditions. He considered lingering on the porch, but without the robes and the frock coat, he felt the wind much more keenly. In addition, he

did not know how a traumatized teenage girl would fare if left on her own in the chilly, damp dark. He crossed to the edge of the porch and bent to pick up the two plastic buckets, now brimming with rainwater. Taking a deep breath, he reached within himself for whatever reserves of patience he possessed, then went into the shabby old building to do his duty by this child entrusted to his care.



Hermione resolutely put away the last two squares of the chocolate bar, tucking them carefully into the pocket of the professor's frock coat. The rich, smooth confection had melted in her mouth and administered to her nerves as well as her hunger. How like Professor Snape to prefer the dark, bittersweet chocolate to the milder milk chocolate favoured by everyone else she knew. Somehow, the implied contradiction seemed to suit him. A secret, woman's smile played over her lips.

Now, she felt up to talking to Snape, but he was pacing the floor like a caged animal.

The professor had brought in the buckets of water and demonstrated for her how to use them to make the toilet flush, and then he had proceeded to ignore her as he prowled the inside perimeter of the old cabin, going from window to window in the darkness, moving with an almost silent tread.



Screwing up her courage, Hermione said, "Sir?"

Snape stopped moving long enough to turn to face her. She wished that she could see his face, but it was much too dark to distinguish his features. Maybe it was just as well; he was unlikely to be smiling encouragingly at her, after all.

"Who is the Interrogator?" she asked.

Snape exhaled noisily through his large, hooked nose. "His name is Alverard. He has perfected certain techniques which aid him in extracting information from even the most resistant sources. He is very highly regarded by his master."

Hermione spoke in a horrified tone. "You mean... torture?"

"Yes. Some methods of Muggle torture, combined with advanced Legilimency skills. But perhaps his most fearsome trait is his willingness to use the subject's affection for family or friends against them."

"He... he hurts their wives?"

"Wives, husbands, children, parents, sweethearts, closest friends — he is quite varied in his choice of weapons, depending upon who the subject is, what kind of information the Dark Lord requires, and what sort of havoc he feels like wreaking that day."

Hermione listened to the catalogue of horrors she had just barely missed, and the emotions lurking on her sleeve caused her to burst into tears.



Damnation! Why could he not remember what a fragile state the girl was in? How in the world would he get her to stop that blasted caterwauling? How in thunder could he listen for the approach of their pursuers with that noise going on? Merlin's petticoats, they would hear her from a distance.

Snape concentrated very hard, trying to remember what he knew of his half-sisters. He had seen his taciturn father soothe his middle sister out of a fit of hysterics one time — what had he done? *Think, Severus!* he reprimanded himself.

Approaching her as he might a wild deer, with cautious steps, and hands held out, palm up, before him, he reached her side, then crouched before her.

"How can I help?" he inquired, calmly.

"I'm s-sorry," she sobbed helplessly. "I don't mean to be this way. I can't help it!"

"I know," he said.

Hermione lifted her face and looked at him; she could not really see his expression, but he was not shouting or sneering or snarling at her. "Would you sit with me?" she asked.

Without speaking, Snape eased down onto the floor beside her, leaving a space wide enough so they would not touch, but not so wide that she would feel a great gulf between them.

"I went to London today to s-see my p-parents," she

choked out, between wrenching sobs. "I'm s-so worried about them, and no one understands that. H-Harry and Ron just think they'll be okay because they're M-Muggles, but I'm not so s-sure."

"Did you see them?" Snape inquired.

"N-No!" she wailed, a fresh wave of sobs wracking through her body. "I d-didn't get there. Those f-foul Death Eaters grabbed me! I *hate* them!"

Things were not going very well. He was down here, on her level, engaging her in conversation, and all she could do was cry harder. How did one make them *stop*?

The decision of what to do was snatched from him as Granger lunged in his direction and began to blubber all over his best cloak. "Now they'll never know I tried to warn them!" She grabbed handfuls of his clothing and held tightly to him. "If they die, it will be my f-fault."

Snape looked down at the mass of frizzy hair, which obscured the rest of the girl from his sight. Now he remembered how his father had calmed Shadow's hysterics. *He who hesitates is lost*, he told himself, before reaching to pat the girl on the back.

"There, there," he muttered, feeling like a fool.

His touch and voice seemed to bring about a minute lessening of the volume of the sobs, almost as if she were quieting in order to be able to hear his words. "You're all

right,” he tried, continuing to pat her back.

Now there was a definite calming of the tempest.

“I am so s-sorry to be such a p-problem,” she whispered into his chest, as her breathing began to even out.

“The Aurors *did* put up additional wards on your parents’ home and offices, you know,” he told her, wondering if he could safely quit patting her now.

There was an ominous sensation in the region of his left pectoral, as if she were burrowing her undoubtedly wet face into the fabric of his white linen shirt. An indistinct murmuring came to his ears in the same moment that he could have sworn he felt her lips moving against him. A man can withstand only so much. Reaching for a tool that would remove her lips from his body — sod the shirt — he allowed his tone to border on annoyance.

“Miss Granger! If you must speak, do so clearly.”

Now it felt as if it were her cheek pressed to him, rather than her lips; that was some improvement, was it not?

“I’m sorry, Professor — what I said was, do *you* believe my parents are safe?”

The retort her query deserved hovered on his lips. How the hell was *he* supposed to know who was safe and who was not? Perhaps she mistook him for Trelawney? Then again, did he want her to become hysterical once more? She had all but stopped snivelling, now.

“I believe that they are as safe as the Order can make them, without taking them into protective custody. I believe that they are safer than relatives of other Muggle-born students.”

He was aware of her face tilting upwards; a glance down his nose revealed that the impossible corona of bushy hair was no longer obscuring his view of her face, though he could discern nothing of her expression in the ambient light of the room.

“Really?” she whispered.

Snape bit down on the temptation to swear and perjured himself without a pause.

“Certainly.”

“Thank you, sir,” Granger said, seeming to loosen her hold on his shirt, while simultaneously cuddling still closer to his side.

A moment of time passed in silence, where the only sounds came from the patter of the incessant rain upon the roof. Granger was no longer crying; her breathing had calmed and her torso, pressed so close to his, had relaxed from the bundle of clenched muscles she had been when she first launched herself at him. He had ceased to pat her between the shoulder blades, and his arm rested noncommittally over her shoulder, neither pulling her closer nor putting her from him.

"I knew you would come."

Snape stared at her as if she could see his forbidding expression. "Don't be foolish," he said shortly.

"I knew Harry and Ron wouldn't be looking for me; they weren't expecting me back before nightfall. And no one else in the Order knew where I was." Her voice held a surreal quality, as if she were relating the happenings of a dream. "But you're a Death Eater. Somehow, I knew you would find out, and you would come for me."

Good God, now what? How to put a damper on this high-flight of hero-worship?

"What utter rubbish," he drawled, his tone dripping with insolence. "The Dark Lord's Death Eaters care nothing for scrubby schoolgirls."

Once again he felt the movement as she tilted her face up to him. "You say that as if you're trying to make fun of me," she said complacently, "but you're not. I can tell."

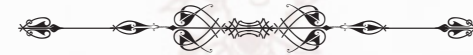
How easily he could annihilate this ridiculous child and her "sleeve" proclamations! For a moment he allowed himself to dwell on the constraining, discouraging things he could say to her. In less than sixty seconds he could have her cowering on the other side of the room, offended and chastened enough that she would never again *think* a charitable thought about him, much less dare to *utter* one!

The throb of an on-coming headache speared through

his skull. He did not need to have Granger as a sodden mass of emotion to deal with through the rest of the night. If he gave vent to his defences, she would be just that, in a matter of seconds. It would behove him, rather, to engage her in conversation — on *impersonal* topics, preferably.

"I have been meaning to ask you," he prevaricated, having never intended to speak of it, "what your thesis was, when deciding to base your Independent Study project on the uses of Jobberknoll feathers..."

Granger stirred; now her head angled so that she leaned against him, rather than holding onto him. Her posture became even more relaxed, less frantic as she was lured into intellectual discussion.



"...but you've never had a word of praise for any work I have ever done in your class."

Snape snorted. "Do you not receive praise enough from every other professor you have?"

"But what does that have to do with you? Or with my Potions work?"

"Have you ever heard me praise anyone's work?"

"Is my work in Potions praiseworthy or not?"

"How dare you plague me about it? How much admiration and adulation does one insufferable know-it-all require?"

“What a mean thing to say!” Tears threatened in the tremulous tone.

Bugger.

“Your work is perfectly adequate, as your marks from me attest, Miss Granger!”

Anger flared. “My marks are *much* more than *adequate*, Professor!”

“Are they?” How easy it was to bait her with a touch of contempt.

“They are *OUTSTANDING!*”

In her extreme annoyance, she had pushed away from him, now fully prepared for battle as her unchecked emotions poured from her. Snape twitched the edge of his cloak out from under her leg and pulled the warmth around himself as he contemplated his next taunt.

In the next moment, a pulse of magic throbbed through the worn boards of the derelict hunting box. In one smooth motion, Snape covered Granger’s open mouth with his left hand, and pulled her flush against him with his right.

“Quiet!” he breathed into her right ear, as he strained to listen for the hunters who pursued them. His right arm held her to him so tightly that he could feel her heart, thumping erratically beneath the palm of his hand, pressed so firmly to her ribcage.

Another throb of magic, diffuse and widely cast, thrum-

med around them. Snape now pressed Hermione to the rough, dusty floorboards and followed after her, flattening himself against the surface and using an insistent hand to shove her backside down until her legs straightened out and her hips came into contact with the floor.

He could hear Granger’s panicked breathing, but saw, with great satisfaction, that her wand was already in her hand; she was prepared to fight her way out, if necessary. Perhaps Potter and his Dumbledore’s Army nonsense were of some use, after all.

From some distance away, he heard one voice, then another. They were doing sweeps of wide areas with magic scans, searching for the warmth of living beings large enough to be human. Without resorting to magic, there was nothing Snape could do to disguise the fact that they were human-sized and living. He could only hope the weakened, wide-range probes would fail to detect them.

The minutes ticked past, as they lay face-down on the filthy floor and listened for the harbingers of impending doom, but no further signs came. The voices faded away, and no further flashes of magic passed through the walls.

When half an hour had gone by, Granger’s voice spoke up. “May I get up now?”

“Yes,” Snape answered.

“Could you move your hand off my bum, please?”

Horrified, Snape snatched his hand away from her as if he had been burned and both of them moved into sitting positions.

In a very soft voice, Granger said, "When we were first scared and thought they were coming, I wasn't cold at all — I didn't even feel the cold. But now it's as if I'm colder than e-ever!"

Trembling seemed to set in upon her with a suddenness that gave Snape some alarm. He would be well and truly paid out if the girl went into shock now. Purposefully, he shoved his hand into the nearest pocket of the coat she wore; not finding what he sought, he shifted her to one side and plunged his hand into the other pocket. There! The chocolate!

Pulling the foil packet from the folds of his own coat, now sheltering this small, trembling female, he twitched the candy from its wrapping with the impatient movement of his fingers and thrust it to her quivering lips.

"Take the chocolate," he said, in a no-nonsense tone.

With unthinking obedience, Hermione's lips parted and the sweet was on her tongue. The long fingers then closed her mouth with a gentle but insistent pressure, and she immediately began to feel the peace radiating out to her extremities.

"Good girl."

The words were so softly spoken that Hermione thought she had likely imagined them. In the wake of the adrena-

line rush of her second brush with Death Eaters in one day, a languorous exhaustion had come over her out of nowhere. She felt as if she could barely keep her eyes open.

Pinpointing his location from the warmth to her right, she moved against him, as she had done before.

"You're so warm," she said, by way of explanation, unabashedly leaning towards him.

Snape's smirk was quite wasted in the darkness. God knew he was warmer with her next to him; it was pointless to repulse her. He lifted his arm, holding the cloak up and providing unimpeded access to his side.

"Come on, then," he said, in a voice of resignation.

Hermione scooted as close as she could get without moving into his lap and contentedly snaked her arms around his narrow waist as her cheek found its way back to his pectoral muscle.

"Lovely warm," she murmured, near incoherence.

Snape did not answer her, but brought the warm woolen cloak back down so that it is now covered them both; Granger's cheek nuzzled along until she rested upon his sternum and her pointed little face peeked out from the folds of the great black shroud engulfing them.

"...like your voice..."

Merlin, what was she saying now? Perhaps he should pretend he did not hear her and she would go to sleep.

"...you know, Professor?"

What, in the name of every deity, was worth this aggravation?

"Know what, Miss Granger?" He kept his voice soft, hoping she would continue to drift off.

"The dark chocolate. When it melts in my mouth, it tastes just like your voice sounds... especially when my ear is pressed to your chest."

Fortunately, she floated then into sleep and required no reply, for Snape was gobsmacked into silence.



And the dark of the night closed around the two refugees, huddled in the rickety shanty in the English wood. One slept serenely in the arms of her protector, supremely confident in his ability to shield her from all harm. The other stared into the inexplicable dark, a fragrant charge cradled to his heart, tantalized by yet another prize the likes of which he would never possess, breathing all that night her scent of strawberries and essence of almonds.



When morning came, Hermione opened her eyes, wondering where she was. The deep breathing of the body upon which she rested quickly reminded her that she was bundled up with her disagreeable Potions professor. Tilt-



ing her head back, she risked a look at him.

Snape's head was leaning against the rough wall of the room. Though his mouth was slightly open, he did not snore. The arm which held her to him clasped her even in his sleep; the long-fingered hand resting in the curve of her waist, above her hip, actually clutched a scrap of the fabric of the robes she wore; the hand had slipped beneath the rougher wool of the frock coat to seek out the softer fabric of the robes to hold in his fingers as he slept.

During the hols she had spent with the boys in Grimmauld Place and at the Burrow, she had fallen asleep more than once in a tumble of blankets and Weasleys. She had been held by Viktor, as well as Ron, and kissed by each of them, too — but nothing she had experienced thus far in her life compared to the feelings conjured by her nearness to this man. Severus Snape was not handsome, nor was he charming — he wasn't really even kind, in the general way. Yet, he had boldly and quickly come up with a plan to free her, had risked his own life as well as his position within the Death Eaters, to save her from the fate planned for her by her captors. He had brought her to this place, made her as comfortable as he could make her, shielded her from the Death Eaters' search, then held her while she slept. The dark stubble of beard along his jaw, the iron grip of the arm about her, the definition of the muscle beneath the



fine linen shirt upon which her cheek rested — these were the physical attributes of a man, not a boy — and as she absorbed the entirety of the man she held in her arms, the thrill of warmth that rushed through her had nothing at all to do with the restorative properties of chocolate.



Snape's eyes opened and his first sight was of warm brown eyes and a welcoming smile. Waking from his restless dreams, it seemed a perfectly natural thing to him, that he should open his eyes and find a pretty girl giving him a glowing look. Without thought, he murmured, "Good morning, girl."

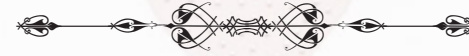
The radiant look upon the girl's face brought an answering smile to his lips; one corner of his mouth quirked up and the opposite eyebrow went up also, as if to balance his face. The memory of her scent came to him, and he dipped his large, ugly nose to the top of her head, where he surreptitiously breathed in the strawberry-almond scent which meant... what? His waking mind struggled to recapture the meaning of the scent as his physical reaction to it, and to the warm, welcoming, female body pressed to his side asserted itself.

Hermione — yes, *Hermione* — had never taken her eyes from his face, even when he half-buried it in her hair and



took a deep breath. She simply continued to look at him with eyes full of wonder. It was not until she reached a timid finger to touch his face, with a whispered, "Severus," that Snape snapped back to reality. The abruptness with which he put her from him and scrambled to his feet was somewhat disorienting to both of them.

He stood for only a moment, towering over her as she sprawled upon the dusty floor, clad in nothing but his own clothes, before whisking himself, and his inappropriate reaction, into the bathroom.



He had shooed her into the bathroom, where she used the toilet, washed her face in water from the bucket, and removed his clothing with some regret. The collar of the frock coat held a trace of his musky scent, and she buried her face in it one last time before she put on her own nearly-dry clothing and returned the professor's robe and coat to him.

"Thank you, sir, for all you've done," she began, looking up at him shyly.

Snape turned from her hastily. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes," she admitted.

Snape pulled another bar of chocolate from his cloak pocket and extended it to her. Hermione's brow furrowed as she looked at the Honeyduke's wrapper.



"That's yours, sir," she said, making no move to take the bar from him.

"Nonsense," he snapped. "I ate mine while you slept."

Hermione looked pointedly at the part of the floor where they had slept.

"I don't see a wrapper," she stated.

Snape took a menacing step toward her. "Your skills for espionage will never develop if you continue to leave your rubbish littered about." He took her wrist and placed the chocolate in her hand. "Eat it," he ordered tersely as he headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To make sure it is safe for us to leave, Miss Granger."

Hermione settled again on the floor, wishing there were something else to sit on, and opened the Honeyduke's wrapper. If she were to be confined to only one food, she supposed she would want for it to be chocolate — but she couldn't help thinking about the breakfast of eggs and sausages the boys were likely settled down to now.

She had eaten half the chocolate and tucked the rest away in her cloak pocket when he returned.

"We will walk into the village and you will catch the next train to London," he informed her, indicating that she was to go out the open cabin door. "From there you will walk to Diagon Alley and immediately Apparate to Hogwarts.

There will be no detours." He looked unyielding, merely gesturing her again out into the early morning air.

Hermione held her ground. "I'm not ready to go just yet," she said.

Both of his eyebrows arched. "Feeling insubordinate this morning, Miss Granger? Must I remind you that I am not only your teacher, whom you are bound to obey, but that I am also your superior officer in the Order?"

Hermione advanced upon him. "You know I — I feel something for you," she began, feeling her face flame at her own audacity. Her daring was making her feel ill, but if she did not say it now, when would she ever have the chance?

Snape's closed face seemed, if possible, to become even more shuttered. He crossed his arms over his chest and loomed over her, glaring down his nose. "You are suffering from an understandable bout of hero worship, compounded by that bloody potion!"

She placed one hand on each of his forearms as he held them firmly crossed.

"You feel something, too. Something for me. And you haven't *had* the potion."

Snape delivered her his most denigrating sneer. "I hesitate to wound your feelings, Miss Granger, but if I were going to develop feelings for a female, my choice would not be a bushy-haired, buck-toothed schoolgirl!"

Tears started to her eyes, but she did not stand down. “You’re saying the very meanest things you can think of to make me stop, but you don’t mean them, and I won’t stop. You were happy when we woke up. You *smiled* at me. You feel attraction.”

Oh, Merlin in a merry widow — why could he not catch one break in this whole damnably disastrous enterprise? She was going to begin blubbing again, and he would *never* be rid of her!

“What is your point?” he demanded, thinking he might be more successful if he approached this from a different direction.

“Just that I would like to know you — outside of school.”

She had taken her hands off of him, which was a relief, and was wiping the latest of the apparently endless supply of tears from her face.

“You know very well that socialization between a teacher and a student is strictly forbidden,” he said with the remaining tatters of his patience, hoping that his milder tone would stop the waterworks.

“I didn’t mean now!” She looked up into his eyes, her own still holding some remnant of the wonder he had glimpsed there when he awoke. “I meant after I leave school. I know we can’t, now.”

Against his will, he felt some vestige of the emotion he had experienced upon awakening, and his eyes softened as he looked at her. What harm was there in saying

he would see her socially after she left school? He would likely die before having to fulfil the promise; if he did not, one Order party would discharge his debt.

“I think it would be quite something to know you in private life, Hermione Granger,” he murmured in capitulation. Probably he would never be called upon to keep his word; she was at that age when some spotty boy would sweep her off her feet and her fascination with the greasy Potions master would be forgotten. On the off-chance that she stubbornly persisted — and with Granger, one must always take that possibility into consideration — there were certain rules she needed to be aware of. Briefly, the idea of altering her memory flitted through his mind, but he rejected the notion; it was akin to rape, unless she consented — and there was a distant part of him that did not want her to forget.

“I have conditions,” he stated baldly. “No negotiating.”

Granger stood docilely before him, waiting to hear his words.

“This will *never* be spoken of. You may tell your friends all about your big Death Eater adventure and being subjected to hiding in the woods with your slimy teacher — but if I hear one whisper of conjecture about anything else, I will be seriously displeased and no social meetings will ever occur.” He raised an eyebrow, awaiting her agreement; she nodded mutely, and he continued. “Additionally, there will

be no exceptions made to waiting until you leave school for us to see one another socially. Do you understand me?"

There was a momentary blazing look of triumph in her eyes, quickly masked as she averted her eyes. "Yes, Professor," she said dutifully.

He looked at the top of her head and wondered what that look was about — what did she think she had just done? Well, never mind — she was quiescent again, and he was that much closer to the end of this ordeal.

Stepping to one side so that she could precede him through the doorway, he gestured. "Shall we go?"



It had taken them nearly an hour of walking, but they had reached the village called Wool. Snape led her to the small train station. As they approached the ticket counter, he reached into his pocket; he bought a ticket for London and placed it in Granger's hand.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Dorset," he replied, glancing at the large clock on the wall. "Your train will leave in five minutes. You'll be in Waterloo Station in London before nine."

The passengers began to board the train. Without asking, the girl stood on her tip toes and tugged his head down for a kiss to his beard-stubbed cheek. Snape



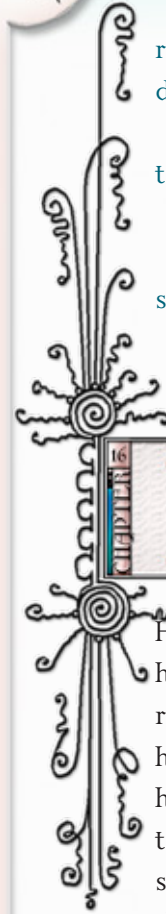
removed her hands from his neck and glared down at her.

"Never speaking of it begins when I get on the train, Professor," she said.

"Good bye, Miss Granger," he replied.

Hermione stepped onto the train and took a seat by the window, where she could see Snape.

She need not have bothered. He was gone.



FROM BELOWSTAIRS, Hermione heard the grandfather clock in the foyer strike six. Dawn would soon break, but still, she could not sleep.

Her mind was so full of the memories — and her heart was so full of the emotions those memories evoked — that she could not have slept if she had tried. And though she knew it would break her heart anew, she could not resist the temptation to dwell in those memories again. Her eyes stared out the window, but her mind played over the happenings of times gone by.



Snape put the empty goblet from him, know-



ing it would be foolish to drink any more. Inebriation would not bring about sleep, not when he was permitting himself to wallow so foolishly in his remembrance of events which had brought him to this place in his life. Brooding, he glared out the window into the dark before dawn.



October, 1997 through June, 1998

Part I

Hermione had returned to Hogwarts from her kidnapping to the joyous relief of Harry and Ron, and to the serious displeasure of Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore. She had to endure the lecturing of her Head of House, and the disappointment of her Headmaster. Also, her Hogsmeade trips were suspended for the remainder of the term. In view of her infraction, she felt she got off with a light punishment.

She had shared with the boys the details of her kidnapping and escape, followed by hiding out all night in the woods. They were torn between horror at her near escape and envy at her participation in what they considered to be "real action." They were now also fairly disgusted that they had reason to be indebted to Snape for his rescue of Hermione.

"Perhaps you would have preferred if he had left me there for that ghastly Interrogator person to torture



me?" she had demanded in some exasperation after they lamented and reproached her for what seemed to be the umpteenth time.

"No!" they fairly shouted in unison.

"Then get *over* it," she snapped at them, and retreated to her room.



The first time she was set to see Professor Snape alone after their night in the woods was for her weekly report on her Independent Study project. She was nervous all that day and changed clothes and rearranged her hair four times before anxiously making her way down to the dungeons. With butterflies in her stomach, she pushed open his office door — only to find herself confronted with Professor Dumbledore, as well as an expressionless Potions master.

"Professor Snape tells me that your Sleeve Potion performed admirably in your unscheduled test, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "He has awarded your project an Outstanding mark, and you will not be required to spend your Tuesday evenings with him any longer." The headmaster smiled at her as if she had just been rewarded with a rare treat.

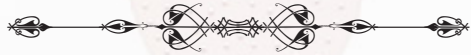
Hermione turned reproachful eyes on Snape, but he was writing on the parchment before him on his desk. "You may leave your notes with me, Miss Granger, and I will



add them to your report.”

Professor Dumbledore stood and waited while Hermione placed her notes carefully on Snape’s desk, then he gestured toward the door. “I’ll walk you back to Gryffindor Tower, shall I? I need to have a word with Minerva.”

Hermione waited for Snape to look up, but he continued to scratch away on the parchment; at last she turned and preceded Dumbledore out of the office, trying desperately to ignore the painful lump in her throat.

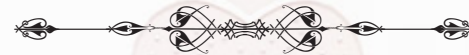


As October wore into November, and began its inevitable march towards the Christmas holidays, Hermione spent more time alone than she had ever done before. Sitting alone in her room at night, looking out the windows of Gryffindor Tower at the grounds, she could perfectly recall the sensation of being held to Snape’s side as if he would never let her go. Closing her eyes, she could feel again the texture of the linen upon which her cheek had rested — and oh, so vividly, she could feel the toned muscle of his chest. Her arms had been wrapped about his lean waist; he was whip thin, but possessed of a wiry strength and well toned musculature, evident to her small hands as she held onto him. The emotions her reminiscences conjured within her were almost overwhelming in



their strength. It was a feeling that began low in her stomach and billowed upwards, into her chest, until her heart-beat quickened — then descended, bringing an ache that seemed to be impervious to all efforts to dispel it.

Thus far, her efforts to push thoughts of him out of her mind so that she could concentrate on preparing for the war and on studying for her N.E.W.T.s were failing miserably.



Snape never thought of her — or so he told himself.

He pushed all thoughts of their night in the woods from him, storming through his days in much the same way as he had always done — only more so. If he had been a terror in the classroom before, he now reached new levels of acidic nastiness. His daily progress from one end of the castle corridors to the other was attended by an orgy of point deduction unparalleled in the history of Hogwarts.

It was only in the darkest hours of the night watches that he was unable to defend himself from the memory of holding her in his arms while she slept. Such innocence, cradled in the arms of such depravity, would have amused him in earlier times. The trusting way she turned her well-being over to him disarmed him in a way he was unable to qualify. The way his traitorous body responded to the mere memory of her body pressed to his infuriated him in



a way he was unable to quantify.

In spite of his repeated failures to do so, he continued to promise himself, on a daily basis, that he would put her completely out of his mind, so that he could concentrate on the final confrontation to come with the Dark Lord — and on getting through the rest of this school year so that the issue could be resolved.



The Order gathered in Grimmauld Place after the final battle. In small groups, they straggled in over a period of several days, craving the company of their comrades as they began to process what they had seen, and done, over the three day battle at the Riddle estate. The battle had occurred at the beginning of the Christmas holidays; the students were not required to be in classes, the teachers were not needed at the school, and the holiday was easily passed at headquarters. Christmas Day came, and went, and still the Order lingered in Grimmauld Place, eating meals together and sitting up late into the night, deep in conversation.

The report was that Snape had spent one day in the infirmary at Hogwarts, recovering from an injury to his shoulder, before disappearing. He was not at the school, and he was not at headquarters. Hermione looked for him, starting up each time the bell chimed, but the Potions



master did not appear.

Near the end of the week following New Year's Day, Dumbledore came into the sitting room one evening as Sirius and Remus sat over a chessboard and the Weasley siblings were engaged with Tonks in a game of Exploding Snap. Hermione was in the corner with a book open on her knees; Harry sat near Sirius, adding yet another unnecessary coat of varnish to his Firebolt.

"It is time for us to begin to return to our normal lives," the headmaster said, as all faces in the room turned to him. "To that end, we will have an official celebration here on Saturday night. On Sunday night, the students will return to Hogwarts. Classes will begin on Monday."

Whispered conversations broke out amongst the inhabitants of the room, but Hermione simply gazed with unseeing eyes at her book. Would he attend?

Saturday night arrived and the bell chimed all night as people came in and out. Hermione stopped looking up hopefully at each arrival. As in the case of the watched cauldron which never boiled, it was when she had given up on him that he appeared. She was standing with Luna and Ginny, talking about going back to school, when she heard the unmistakably silky baritone in the hallway outside the sitting room.

Her heart leapt, and her stomach swooped and she lost



track of the conversation. Keeping her place between the girls, she pivoted and looked into the hallway, craning her neck for a glance of him.

When her eyes found him, she was looking directly into his impassive face. For a matter of seconds, he looked at her and she looked at him; then he turned to speak to Arthur Weasley. No matter how many times she glanced at him, she did not catch his eyes again.

The hour was growing late, and the boys had become quite silly under the influence of the punch, which the twins had spiked within minutes of Molly having placed it on the refreshment table. Those who had not become exceedingly silly had instead become depressingly morose. Hermione, slipping away from her friends, came upon her Potions master as he leant against the wall behind the punch bowl. She could not prevent the hectic colour which rushed into her cheeks, but she was quite proud of the unremarkable timbre of her voice as she said, "May I serve you some punch, sir?"

Unspeaking, Snape extended his empty punch cup to her. Hermione took it from him, bravely keeping her composure as their fingers touched — first when he handed the cup to her, then when he took it from her again. The second time, she looked up into his face. As if compelled by her gaze, Snape looked up from her hand, which stubbornly

held onto his cup, and he allowed her to look her fill.

"You are well," she said stupidly, stating the obvious. *Oh, well done, Hermione*, she thought.

"As you see," he replied evenly.

She took a hesitant step towards him, without taking her eyes from his face. Snape continued to trade stares with her, apparently unmindful of the fact that they both held resolutely to the glass of punch. She absorbed the planes and angles of his face and the impenetrable depths of his eyes, and he permitted her to do so, rather than speaking a harsh word and turning from her, as he had done so many times since the night in the woods. Taking a deep breath, she spoke at last.

"Professor..."

One eyebrow rose.

"...no exceptions?"

The contact was broken as he took the cup from her and half turned away, allowing the curtain of his hair to swing into his face, obscuring his expression.

"Thank you for the punch, Miss Granger," he said, then purposefully strode from the room.

Feeling very foolish, Hermione watched him leave. Replacing the ladle in the punch bowl, she headed upstairs to bed.

It was in February that there began to be rumours regarding the Family Preservation and Marriage Law Act. The Hogwarts students, isolated as they were from the rest of the world, obtained their information first from the DAILY PROPHET; later, as the rumblings grew louder, they began to hear more of it in letters from home.

Public sentiment was sharply divided. There were those who opposed the legislation as a violation of free will, and those who approved it as the most reasonable possible solution to an otherwise insoluble problem.

Albus Dumbledore, for whom the fall of Lord Voldemort had not signalled the end of his intense interest in the destiny of the wizarding world, followed the news carefully. He also continued to work his network of informants with the same avidity as he had ever done.

...which is how Snape found himself now spending stupid, pointless evenings at social gatherings amongst the movers and shakers of the new government, much as he had once spent stupid, pointless evenings at social gatherings amongst the Death Eaters.

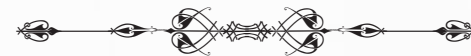
The only difference he could find between them was that while the government food was superior, the Death Eaters' wine had them beaten — no contest.

Well, there was one other — barely significant — difference. The ugly, greasy Potions master had become the strik-



ing, enigmatic War Hero. Ever since he had been awarded the Order of Merlin, First Class, he had become an object of interest to females. Putting aside the occasional, highly inappropriate letters he had received from strangers, he now found himself socially pursued by witches from all over Britain. His suspicious nature prevented him from letting the attention go to his head. He had seen Sirius Black making an ass of himself all over London; he had no intention of making the same error. The women now flocking to him — flattering him, passing him notes — were after the War Hero, not the man. Not a one of them had shown him any attention before he became a celebrity — a sharp contrast to Granger's request to see him socially, and her audacious kiss to his cheek in the train station, acts performed before he had been featured on the front page of the newspaper for heroism.

Pushing such treacherous thoughts out of his mind, Snape approached yet another group of gossipers, and insinuated himself amongst them, to gather information for Dumbledore — just as he had always done.



It was also in February that Hermione began seeing Snape plastered all over the society pages of the newspaper. It seemed as if she could scarcely open the paper without find-



ing yet another picture of Snape in the company of beautiful witches, drinking wine and mingling with the crème of London society at all of the “A” list parties. From the number of times a week she saw his name listed amongst the attendees at the various events, she could not imagine when he found time to mark papers and prepare lesson plans.

She was so jealous it made her physically ill.

In the months since their time alone, she had known she would have to overcome Snape’s stubbornness before she could develop a relationship with him. What she had *not* banked on was the likelihood that she would encounter competition from other women. How stupid could she be? What had she been thinking of? If *she* found him to be intoxicatingly attractive, why would not other women, who were *not* his students, find him doubly so?

In the spirit of she who could not forbear to rub salt in her own wounds, she collected the numerous photographs of Snape cavorting all over London with witches who were older and more sophisticated than she, and kept them hidden in her room. Each night, when she could not sleep, she leafed through them — though whether her purpose was to gird herself for the fight ahead, or to wallow in the pain of his perceived disloyalty, she could not say.



Snape’s reports convinced Dumbledore that the passage of the law was inevitable. In close consultation with McGonagall, they decided to begin to prepare the older students for the task to come. If the Ministry was planning to sponsor a summer of social gatherings to pave the way to the required marriages, then Hogwarts would begin a crash course to teach the sixth and seventh year students how to function in such a societal environment.

A dancing master was brought in; each House had private lessons at first, then all the Houses were brought together so that students could practice their dancing skills en masse. Protocol attachés from the Ministry were invited to hold sessions with the students as well; the Heads of House prowled amongst their charges and stopped to assist in the instructions as the students learned how to bow and curtsy, as well as how to carry out and respond to formal introductions. There were special seminars conducted by wizarding solicitors, explaining how marriage contracts were constructed and enforced, as well as separate sessions for the girls and boys taught by healthcare professionals, for explicit instruction on the nature of the birds and the bees and for individual counselling for personal questions.

All in all, Snape considered the whole enterprise to be completely appalling and unseemly; he was torn between the



indignity of having to assist in perpetrating these horrors upon his students, and his fierce determination to protect the students from the indignities being perpetrated upon them.

In the midst of all the time-consuming extra duties of preparing the students for life after Hogwarts, he found himself missing his own forays into society. Against his will, Snape found that he quite enjoyed being sought after by women. His initial suspicion of their motives had become allayed as the same behaviour was repeated, over and again. He knew he was going to have to marry when the law was passed; he had always considered that it would be his duty to do so at some point in the future, if he survived the war, for the sake of his family name. It had just never dawned on him until now that he might actually enjoy the process of choosing a woman to marry.

He carried his ambivalence to Malfoy Manor, where Lucius Malfoy was enduring the three months of house arrest imposed by the Wizengamot — and making incarceration look good. Malfoy would pour Snape a goblet of the most expensive wine from the Malfoy cellars and while away a few hours in discussion of Snape's wry reflections on society, before being decisively thrashed at chess. It was a satisfactory scheme for them both.



Hermione tackled her new subjects with the same single-minded fervour she had always shown with her studies. In the lectures, she took notes; in the practical lessons, she mimicked what she was shown until she could reproduce it flawlessly — then she proceeded to make the new skills peculiarly her own, by adding personal touches.

Standing before the full-length mirror in her room as she practiced her curtsy, she rationalized that her reasons for seeking to excel were sound ones. If she was going to have to pursue her heart's desire out into polite society, then she needed to have the same social skills the experienced, more urbane witches would have.

Moving back towards her bed, Hermione could not resist picking up the book of newspaper clippings from the table. Though spring was fully upon them, and Easter holidays only days away, there had been no lessening of "Snape sightings," as she had come to think of the disturbing news reports. One recent exposé by Rita Skeeter had set her teeth particularly on edge.

Double Agent Snape Lets Down His Hair At Last!

Hermione snorted, glaring down at the picture beneath the absurd headline. Snape was seated on a settee in yet another drawing room, one elegantly clad leg crossed over the other, engaged in conversation with the attrac-



tive woman sitting by his side.

The photograph was made ridiculous by the three witches standing behind the settee, leaning over, in all their low-cut glory, to take part in the conversation, too.

Hermione prodded violently at the one in the middle and all three of the hangers-on glared up at her indignantly from the newsprint. The middle witch held her attention, for she had a name to go with that face. Why was Fleur Delacour party-hopping in London, rather than spreading inferiority complexes in Paris?

And how was she, Hermione, supposed to be able to put on a fair fight when she was locked up in school and Snape was out there in society, well, *socializing*?

Having worked herself into the same rage and around the same impossible twist to the destination she reached each night when she tried to think of a way to improve her chances, she shoved the scrapbook heedlessly onto the floor and threw herself onto her bed for another restless night of little sleep.



Snape placed himself in the shadows in the Great Hall, watching the sixth and seventh year students dancing. Minerva had caused this particular entertainment, the last one before the Easter holiday began, to be made more



hideous than usual by having the children dress formally. The girls had dance cards and the boys had the chore of putting their names on the cards to claim the dances.

Across the room, well within his line of sight, stood Hermione Granger. She had made some sort of effort to tame the messy hair into a scraped-up bun. The formal robes were of a nice shade of blue. She looked appropriate, certainly well enough for a school function, and far better than the vast majority of the other girls, who wore too many cosmetics, or clothing that was too revealing to be proper for school children.

Having given her this cursory examination, to which he was entitled, as one of her teachers, he turned his gaze to a different object and attempted to amuse himself with reflections regarding the other events which he had to look forward to before departing Hogwarts to spend the summer sorting out the tangled affairs of his stepmother and his half-sisters.

Yet his eyes continued, against his will and inclination, to seek out the Granger girl as she moved about the room. She certainly never seemed to lack for a partner and she appeared to be conducting herself with an oddly self-assured air, unlike her behaviour with him in the cabin on that October night.

No! He would *not* think about that. Stirring himself to



action, he stormed up to three Slytherin boys, who were lounging against a wall and trading sniggering remarks behind their hands.

“The point of this exercise is not for you to gain experience at propping up the wall like so many ill-bred louts,” he snarled, appearing before them like the Giant Squid, as if from a cloud of inky blackness. “You, Goyle, go ask Miss Bulstrode to dance. Crabbe, ask Miss Parkinson. Stand up straight, Zabini! Go ask Miss Bones to dance; she has no partner.”

Only Zabini even dared to consider a protest of this high-handed behaviour; Crabbe and Goyle had already scuttled away like beetles fleeing the advent of light.

“...but she’s a *Hufflepuff!*”

Snape took one threatening step closer and Zabini moved obediently to ask Susan Bones to dance, managing the task so politely that he received a satisfied nod from Snape for his troubles.

With some small measure of his spleen thus vented, Snape turned to survey the room, only to find his eyes once again riveted upon Miss Granger as she left Longbottom and flowed into Potter’s arms for the next dance.

And so it proceeded for the rest of the night, as Granger continued to dance every dance without respite. In his quarters that night, discussing matters with his third goblet of brandy, Snape realized that a girl so young and

so popular — a girl in the first bloom of her womanhood — would never be concerned with a man so gnarled, withered, and hell-blasted as he.

See her socially? The very idea was ludicrous. She would never notice his absence in the rush of amusements that would come upon her when she left school.

And why was he even wasting his time considering such a preposterous prospect? The words that were spoken between them were simply part of the insanity of that entire situation, and held no more importance than the passing comfort of this, his fourth and final goblet of brandy.

And thus, he excused himself again from ever keeping the appointment they had made to see one another at the end of school, and he passed into brandy-fogged oblivion before the dying embers of his sitting room fire.



Part 2

After spending a week at his family home with his stepmother and half-sisters, Snape permitted himself a rare week in London, for the second half of his Easter holiday. On the Saturday night before he would have to return to Hogwarts, there was a gala night at the Ministry. Dressed in smart new dress robes, with his Order of Merlin pinned to his chest, he mixed with the party attendees and made

mental notes to pass on to Dumbledore.

In his many forays into society, he had found there were types of women whose admiration he enjoyed, and types of women whose admiration he abhorred. The first set of women gave an outward appearance of near-indifference to him, yet continued to seek out his company. The second set of women resembled nothing so much as groupies, and gave the impression that any Order of Merlin would do, providing it had a pulse and a pocket-book. Though he was exercising social skills that had lain dormant for years, he still was not adept at escaping the second set of admirers, without resorting to the tactics that kept his students at bay.

While his cold, insulting ways could clear a room of intelligent and perceptive people rather quickly, the groupie-women seemed nearly impervious to snubs and sneers. It had become his custom to surround himself, when possible, by women from the first set, in order to protect himself from those of the second.

On this particular evening, he had allowed himself to become distracted by a discussion of the plans for the dedication of the Unity Fountain, which was being constructed at Hogwarts. The ceremony was planned in June, on the six-month anniversary of the fall of Voldemort. Snape exchanged views with the Minister on the plans,



then fell into a fit of abstraction as the Minister and his acolytes moved on to the next group discussion.

When next he became aware of his surroundings, he was indeed surrounded. No fewer than four of his least favourite witches were clustered about him, chatting with one another about him, of all things. With no outward sign of his inward panic, he glanced casually to his right, then his left, looking for a route of escape. He had his back to the wall, which had many tactical advantages, but in this case, it was a detriment; he would have to go *through* the chattering gaggle of women to go *from* them. Prior experience had taught him what a bad idea that could turn out to be, as the thoughtless witches had no scruples regarding grabbing his arm, or touching him in some other way. The simple truth of the matter was that Snape loathed to be touched and would rather endure endless prattling than subject himself to the indignity of an unsolicited touch.

On this night, providence made itself known in the form of an angel of mercy.

Fifteen minutes into his groupie incarceration, Fleur Delacour had swept into the middle of the chattering women as if she had every right to be there.

"Professor," she said, in English much improved from what Snape remembered of her speech when she was a Triwizard Champion, "the Unity Fountain Committee



Head is looking for you. Will you come?"

With a polite bow to his companions, he followed the vision of loveliness that was Fleur Delacour to the other side of the Ministry Atrium. When she paused beside one of the refreshment tables, Snape picked up a flute of champagne and slightly bowed as he placed it in her hand.

"Is there a Unity Fountain Committee?" he inquired, as he watched her place the crystal flute to her exquisitely formed mouth.

"Oh, no," she replied with a tiny smile.

Snape raised one eyebrow.

"But you were looking so very uncomfortable," Miss Delacour explained, bestowing another shining smile upon him.

Snape, fascinated almost against his will, continued undisturbed by her side for more than a quarter of an hour. The witches from the second set had migrated across the room and were hovering on the periphery of the crowd, like jackals hoping to isolate a gazelle from the herd. Something in the cool, taunting looks thrown at them by Miss Delacour, when Professor Snape's eyes were not trained upon her face, kept them at a distance for the time being.

Snape found Miss Delacour's company to be a curious mix of attraction and comfort. She did not try to stand too close to him or to touch him, nor did she chatter and babble as many women of her age group and social milieu

tended to do. When she spoke, it was to utter sensible words, and when she listened to him, she did so with a respectful attention which he found striking.

He was, therefore, ready to strike in violence when Sirius Black sauntered up, placing himself between Snape and Miss Delacour. Black executed a perfect bow before smiling deeply into Fleur's surprised blue eyes.

"Your prince is here to rescue you from... ugly tedium, ma'am."

Black cast Snape a look of insolent amusement.

Snape, utterly immobilized by fury, presented his childhood enemy with a face of bland indifference.

Fleur stood before the two tall men, both black-haired, formally attired and decorated with Orders of Merlin; one smiling and beautiful, the other scowling and harsh-featured, and she registered far more than the casual insult flung by one at the other. It would have been beneficial to be able to research who the good-looking one was, but there was no time; she had to act. Rolling the dice, she turned to Black with a glittering smile.

"Merci, Monsieur," she purred, holding her hand out to the handsome rake, who was now presenting Snape with a look of triumph. "Please do me the honour of ridding me of your peacock strutting and your donkey braying. Good night."

Snape was overcome with a small coughing fit when

Miss Delacour turned an unfriendly shoulder on the thunderstruck Sirius Black and graced him with another of her enchanting smiles. “What were you saying, Professor?” she inquired sweetly.

Black laughed incredulously and stepped to the side, so that he faced the profiles of Snape and Fleur. “If I had a hat, I don’t know if I would tip it, or eat it,” he admitted, bowing again. “Honours to you tonight, Snape.”

Snape, in a rare show of gallantry, took Fleur’s hand and raised it to his lips, raising his eyebrows in tandem, as if to inquire for permission. At Fleur’s nod, he said, “No, Black — the honours go to Mademoiselle.”

And he pressed his lips to her graceful hand.



The photographer from the DAILY PROPHET who stepped up and caught that moment on film actually earned a bonus in Galleons from the editor, who published the photograph on the front page with the caption:

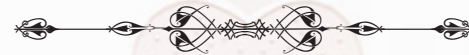
Double Agent Woos London!

As a result of the new flush of celebrity, Snape endured endless teasing from the Hogwarts staff, as well as increased interest from both sets of women on the social scene. The other men now began to regard him with some



respect; Fleur Delacour was as sought-after as she was elusive, and she had demonstrated a decided preference for Snape’s company.

Hermione’s temperamental, if inadvertent, reaction to the photograph set fire to her entire collection of Snape-sighting clippings. She stared, unseeing, out the windows of Gryffindor Tower as the tormenting mementoes burned to ash.



The morning of the dedication of the Unity Fountain dawned warm and fair. Snape was out on the grounds early, checking that the wooden scaffolding which had been built to aid the workers during the construction of the fountain was still sound, and that the garlands which had been used to decorate it were still in place. The Minister, the headmaster, and the Heads of House would each have a few words to say before the dedication was complete; then the scaffolding would be Vanished and the water would commence to flow in the fountain. That evening there would be yet another dance at Hogwarts, though this one would be attended by guests and dignitaries, as well as the sixth and seventh year students.

Snape had been in London on the previous Wednesday night, attending the opening of an art exhibit at the National Wizarding Museum, featuring pieces inspired



by the Final Battle. He was narrowly surveying a painting entitled POTTER FELS THE DARK LORD, thinking that it resembled nothing so much as dirty water swirling down the drain in one of the Potions' classroom basins, when he heard Miss Delacour's voice.

"Is that the way it looked?" she inquired.

Snape turned his head in her direction. "Not in the least," he drawled.

"I understand that the Unity Fountain Committee has arranged the dedication ceremony for this Saturday," the Frenchwoman commented, keeping her eyes carefully trained upon the dubious work of art before them.

Snape snorted.

Taking his reaction as encouragement, Fleur turned to look at him. "I should dearly love to see the dedication ceremony, and to be present at the dance afterward."

Snape was startled into looking at her. "You would?"

Casting her eyes down, she neatly hooked him and reeled him in. "Yes, but if one did not fight in the Battle or go to school at Hogwarts, it requires an invitation to attend," she confided to the top button of his coat.

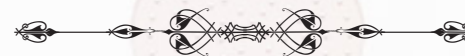
Snape looked down at the shimmering silvery hair on the crown of her head and pictured himself entering the Great Hall with this dazzling beauty on his arm.

"Perhaps you would care to come as my guest," he had

said to her.

Stalking down the aisle between the folding chairs lined up in neat rows across the lawn before the Unity Fountain, he now felt a tinge of regret for the impulsive invitation he had extended. How could he see after the comfort of a guest while maintaining the duties of the Head of Slytherin House?

Knowing that it was a bit late for second thoughts, he headed back to the castle.



Hermione listlessly spooned cereal into her mouth, ignoring the chattering of the boys. The owls began streaming in, bringing the morning post, and she scowled at the newspaper as she slipped a Knut into the leather bag on the post-owl's leg. She was distracted when a large, tawny owl dropped a fair-sized box into Ron's lap before wheeling in mid-air and flying away again.

Ginny, who was sitting beside Hermione, said, "Well, hurry up and open it, then!"

Harry looked at the box and read the direction. "It's from Fred and George," Harry said. "Open it!"

Ron tore the paper away, revealing a plain brown box with an envelope attached. As Ron ripped the envelope open, Ginny picked up the box and looked at it, all around.

Harry was reading over Ron's shoulder, and both of

them began to laugh.

“The box is full of soap powder,” Ron managed, between laughs. “Fred and George reckon we should sprinkle the powder in the fountain so it will be filled with bubbles.”

Ginny had set the box back down and was now reading the letter. “Not just any soap bubbles — ‘Enchanted, multi-coloured bubbles, which will grow to extraordinary sizes and assume fantastical shapes,’ is the way the advert reads.” Ginny folded the paper down and looked up at Hermione, Harry, and Ron, her face alight with mischief. “They want us to run their last big field test before they put the bubbles into mass production! They’d do it themselves, but they’ve got business in London today.”

Hermione had already resumed her lackadaisical ingestion of soggy, cold cereal, determinedly not opening the newspaper to the society page. “No,” she muttered, between bites.

Ginny threw her a pitying look, then turned her attention back to the boys. “It’ll be *brilliant!*”

Ron looked horrified. “Mum will kill me! I can’t do that, Gin, I’m a *prefect!*”

Harry had picked up the box, and opened it, revealing numerous colourful packages, neatly slotted into the interior. “Look at these — there must be forty different varieties, when you figure in all the scents, the colours,



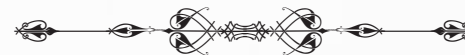
and the shapes. We have to do this — it’s our duty to the rest of the students, and to the generations to come. We have to make the *Commemorative Unity Fountain* dedication memorable, to one and all.”

Harry’s tone on the last sentence had become bitingly sarcastic. Ginny nodded in understanding. None of the Houses were really keen on the reasoning behind the new fountain. It was meant to be “a new beginning” at “unity in the wizarding educational system.” The mascots of each House were represented in the fountain design; a lion, a badger, an eagle, and a serpent, all shown in cooperative harmony — and shooting water from various body parts.

Ron spoke up, hoping to change the subject. “Don’t you have a guest coming for the dedication, Hermione?”

Hermione pushed the half-full bowl of cereal away from her. “Yes, Viktor is free today, so he’s going to come for the dedication and the dance.”

Ron began to speak to Hermione about Viktor Krum, while Harry and Ginny crept away from the table together, the box of magical soap powder and letter from the Weasley twins concealed within their robes.



Hermione strolled out onto the grounds some time later, contentedly soaking up the sun as she scanned the arriving



guests for Viktor. She knew that Sirius and Remus would be here today, as well as Tonks, Mad-Eye, Kingsley, and many of the Weasleys. It should be a fun day, with many friends present and no looming disaster to darken their festivities.

Using her hand to shade her eyes from the bright sunlight, she saw Sirius and Remus coming down the drive, each of them speaking to the woman who walked between them.

What was Fleur Delacour doing at Hogwarts today? She was neither an alumna nor a veteran!

As if in answer to her question, Snape strode into her line of sight, neatly intersecting his path with that of Fleur and her escorts. Hermione could not hear their words, but she knew from the cheerful looks on the faces of Sirius and Remus that they were bantering; she also knew, from the smug smirk on Snape's face, that he was feeling victorious as he adeptly separated Fleur from the other men and bore her away.

The emotion which struck Hermione as she watched Snape and Fleur walking together was envy of a degree so intense that she began to know why jealousy was referred to as the "green-eyed monster."



Snape dutifully took his place on the platform built onto the scaffolding over the Unity Fountain. The Minis-



ter and the headmaster would speak first, then the Heads of House would speak in alphabetical order of their Houses; Slytherin came last.

The folding chairs were filled and more had been conjured as guests continued to arrive. Snape contented himself with the notion that if so many of them showed up for this event, then fewer would feel compelled to be present in two weeks for the Alumni Day, featuring the Quidditch match of the Alumni Team versus the Hogwarts All-Stars. Though he could not permit himself to grimace, his nostrils flared in disgust. He would be quite pleased when this interminable term came to an end.

The Minister was droning on about the power of unity, but Snape's eyes were searching the crowd for the thorn in his side. There, sitting next to the Bulgarian Quidditch player and in the middle of a cheerful mass of Gryffindors, was Hermione Granger. Had he actually considered seeing her socially when she left school? She was just a child! Immature, frivolous, thoughtless — she would make a very poor match for a man of his age. He needed a witch with the maturity to bear herself as the wife of a professor; with the worldliness to be able to assist his stepmother with his half-sisters, and with the good sense not to expect more from him than he could promise to provide. Look at her! She obviously had a tendre for the Bulgarian. Just as he had



predicted, she had found some spotty boy — well, no one could call the strapping Quidditch player by that sobriquet — but she had found someone more appropriate to her age, and she would never notice if he, Snape, failed to contact her for an assignation once she had left school.

His gaze then travelled to the front row, where he had ensconced Miss Delacour, between two elderly witches from the Ministry. The well-behaved young woman was attending to the speaker with every appearance of interest, which was much more than he could say for the Granger girl and her giggling friends. His enquiries into the character and reputation of the Delacour family, both in England and in France, had brought no negative reports. And one had to give credit where credit was due: the French were renowned for their arranged marriage customs. A girl reared in France, by an aristocratic French family, would understand the components of a marriage of convenience. One could not say the same for the girls reared in this country in the last thirty years; most of them expected to marry for love and they expected *romance*, as well.

Absurd!

The Minister had completed his remarks, which were receiving polite applause, and the headmaster had stepped to the podium. Snape's sharp eyes could not help but mark the increasing agitation of the students, partic-

ularly the Gryffindors. He thought their jumpy inattention was extreme, even for that lot of dunderheads. They seemed to be uncommonly interested in what was going on beneath and behind the platform.

Dumbledore completed his comments and surrendered the podium to Minerva McGonagall, who began to speak of the glories of Gryffindor House. Snape surreptitiously stepped to the edge of the platform and peered around the garland-covered scaffolding to see what was exciting the student body.

"Filius!" he hissed. The smaller man looked over inquiringly. "Take Pomona off the platform — the scaffolding is becoming unstable!"

Flitwick did not argue, but took Professor Sprout's arm and began to lead her down the steps. Snape strode over to Minerva and spoke behind her back to Dumbledore.

"Headmaster, please move the Minister to the ground — the scaffolding is going to come down any minute."

Dumbledore took the Minister's arm and hustled him down the steps.

McGonagall turned an acerbic look on Snape, saying, "Severus, *must* you interrupt me?" As the last words left her mouth, the platform shifted beneath her feet and Snape snatched her up and scrambled to the ground, halting beside Dumbledore and the Minister.

“Whatever is it, Severus?” Dumbledore asked, as the scaffolding folded in upon itself and the wood clattered to the ground, revealing the fountain in all its glory.

Snape watched as the bubbles in the fountain continued to mount, a fabulous mass of pink, coral, yellow, green, blue, lavender, and chartreuse bubbles, smelling of bubble gum and tangerines and lemons and limes and raspberries and grapes and butterbeer. When the topmost bubbles began to float free, assuming the fanciful shapes of swans and unicorns and dragons and mermaids and seahorses and Thestrals and Hippogriffs, Snape snapped out his answer to Dumbledore.

“Sabotage. It is sabotage, Headmaster.”

Snape’s proclamation was drowned out by the roar of approval from the delighted spectators. The Minister, oblivious to Snape’s angry disapproval, clapped Dumbledore upon the back and said, “Marvellous idea, Dumbledore! Instead of fireworks, you had bubble-works! Outstanding!”

Without another word, Snape turned and stormed back into the castle, his expression like a thundercloud.

With a calculating look upon her face, Fleur Delacour gave him a head start, then followed in his wake.



Hermione whirled on Harry and Ginny, who were laugh-



ing and hugging one another with tears rolling helplessly down their faces.

“I can’t believe you did that!” she cried.

Viktor took her by the hand and began to walk towards the fountain. “Now, this is something one does not see everyday,” he commented.

Hermione opened her mouth to tell him off, but he forestalled her by swinging her up into his arms. “I think you will enjoy a bubble bath, no?”

Hermione’s scream of protest echoed across the lawn as Krum dumped her playfully into the fountain. The entire student body was silenced as they looked up to see who had screamed. There was a moment when no one moved, and no one spoke — and then they surged toward the bubbly fountain as if they were small children and it was a magical playground.

The Commemorative Unity Fountain dedication was now fully in chaos; the students were in charge and the riot was on.

Professor Dumbledore watched with unconcealed glee as the students of the four Houses converged upon the bubble-filled fountain in a show of unrestrained unity. Noting the disconcerted looks up on the faces of the Ministry dignitaries and other guests who undoubtedly were unable to interpret the actions of the children as harmonious, the Headmaster cried out over the cacophony of joyful noise



and said, "Refreshments for all who are not yet wet will be served in the Great Hall! As for the rest of you — carry on."

And he cheerfully led the parade of dry people into the castle.



Snape stood in the embrasure of the window, glaring down at the spectacle of the students frolicking in the fountain as if it were a giant paddling pool. He could not have said what about it made him so angry; other than the fact that it was rule-breaking and student-induced anarchy. The lot of them were drenched, splashing one another, chasing the creature-shaped bubbles across the lawn — and right in the middle of it all was Granger, in the company of her Quidditch-playing cavalier. Though he was too far distant from the fountain to distinguish her voice, he was sure he could hear her peals of laughter as she was pushed once again beneath the serpent's gout of spewed water and emerged looking even more like a drowned rat.

What kind of behaviour was this for Hogwarts' Head Girl? What kind of example was she setting for the other students? Yet it could not be denied that Head Boy Draco Malfoy was in the middle of the crowd, and most of the prefects from all four Houses were in it as well.

"How very disrespectfully they are behaving," Fleur



Delacour said quietly.

Snape glanced sharply behind himself and found her there. "I apologize for leaving you in that mayhem," he said stiffly.

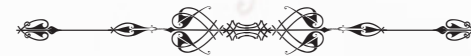
Fleur waved one hand. "I would have done the same, if I were in your place, and walked away from such a disgraceful display. It shows an extreme lack of restraint."

Snape felt himself warming towards this woman, who was speaking his own thoughts out loud. She was gazing out the window at the romping young people, and in his estimation, she seemed infinitely above them. Her expensively tailored robes were uncreased, she had not a hair out of place — she was calm and collected and utterly unruffled by it all.

"Shall we go down and partake of refreshments in the Great Hall?" he inquired.

Fleur felt a surge of elation when she saw that he was offering his arm to her. The untouchable spy was going to permit her physical contact.

She took his arm and rewarded him with a dazzling smile.



Hermione barged into the room shared by Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil, and threw her hands up in exasperation.

"I can't do anything with my hair!"

Parvati looked up from her mirror and nodded. "And I



can't wash off the smell," she complained.

Lavender stepped into her shoes and said, "Well at least you smell like bubblegum, you know. I smell like limes!"

Hermione sniffed her shoulder. "Butterbeer. I smell like *butterbeer!*"

All three girls dissolved into giggles.

"Well," Lavender said, when she could catch her breath, "at least the boys won't smell any better, so we're all in the same boat."

"But my hair!" Hermione moaned, returning to her main complaint. "Sleekeazy isn't touching it! I can't control it!"

Lavender took her by the shoulders and sat her down. "Let us see what we can do with it," she soothed.



The adult guests present for the Unity Fountain dedication joined the sixth and seventh year students for a Feast before the dance that night. Hermione sat with Viktor, but could not keep herself from glancing repeatedly to the High Table where Professor Snape sat with his guest, Fleur Delacour. Fleur was in an evening gown of muted green silk, her silvery hair her only ornament. Hermione looked down at her Gryffindor-red dress robes with the high, square neckline and the pretty gold embroidery. She had liked the robes so much when she had chosen



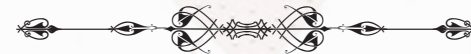
them, but now she felt like such a child in comparison to the woman sitting next to Snape.

Viktor bent down to her ear. "Do you know you smell good enough to eat?"

Hermione gave him a sour look. "You mean, good enough to *drink*. I smell like a big bottle of butterbeer."

With her eyes on the man she wanted and had sworn to win, she thought, *It is virtually impossible to feel sexy when you smell like a beverage.*

As she saw a rare smile cross Snape's face, she had never felt so hopelessly outclassed.



Part 3

Snape was in his office, marking the sixth year students' end-of-year exams, when a shadow fell across his desk. He could smell her before he raised his eyes from the parchment before him; the fragrance of strawberries and essence of almond flooded his olfactory senses, waking scent memories that were as deep as they were primal. Bracing himself, he raised an emotionless face to look into the brown eyes of Hermione Granger.

It had been ten days since the dedication of the Unity Fountain. It had seemed to him that she was once again following his movements with her eyes, as she had done



when the happenings of their night in the woods had still been fresh. He was at a loss to explain why, when she so obviously had attracted the attention of every male in her class, as well as the admiration of an internationally famous Quidditch star.

Instinct reminded him that, when in the company of an unknown entity, it would behoove him to tread carefully.

“Yes, Miss Granger?”

From behind her back she produced a fine linen handkerchief, edged in a silvery green silk.

“I beg your pardon, sir, but I found this handkerchief, and I believe it belongs to Miss Delacour.”

Snape quirked an eyebrow at her. “Why do you think it belongs to Miss Delacour?”

Hermione extended the scrap of fabric towards him. “I am sure I saw her with it at the Unity Fountain dance, when you seemed to be having such a good time.”

Snape’s eyes sank back down to the parchment on the desk; with a hand that appeared steady, he dipped his quill into the inkstand. “I do not know if it is hers, but I will ask her when I see her. You may leave it on the desk.”

He could hear her somewhat uneven breathing and the moment stretched on, but still she did not leave. A spark of memory, the weight of her body pressed to him in sleep, brought an involuntary tremor to his hand, and

he splotted the page with ink.

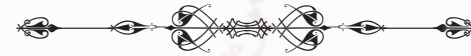
“Is there something else, Miss Granger?”

“No, Professor,” she answered.

Snape blotted the ink and set the essay aside, moving on to begin marking the one beneath it before he said, “Please be certain to pull the door completely shut behind you — thank you.”

Snape was spared the sight of the violence with which she closed his classroom door, as his eyes were averted. He was reliant on his ears for information regarding her hasty retreat back down the dungeon corridor. When he was certain she was gone, he finally reached for the handkerchief. If it was Fleur’s possession, it had already surrendered to Hermione’s scent. He brought the fabric to his face and inhaled once, before thrusting it deeply into his pocket and resuming the marking of the papers.

He never asked Fleur if the handkerchief belonged to her.



Snape’s hopeful prediction that the large turn-out for the Unity Fountain dedication would reduce the size of the crowd present for Alumni Day was proven incorrect. It seemed that now that the war was over, the Hogwarts alumni could not get enough of their alma mater.

Stiffly, but dutifully, Snape sat beneath the billowing

green marquee with his seventh year Slytherins, speaking with their parents and with the Slytherin alumni who stopped by to greet him. It was abundantly obvious that far fewer Slytherin alumni were present this year than appeared for other Houses. It was not said aloud, but was understood that many of the former Slytherins were dead or in prison because of their alliance with Tom Riddle and the Death Eaters.

Snape watched the larger crowds beneath the red, yellow, and blue marquees. He was disgusted to see how many of the members of the Order of the Phoenix and the Auror office clustered beneath the red Gryffindor tent. Black and Lupin were carrying on so disgracefully with McGonagall that he expected her to hex them, but she simply blushed and scolded them.

It was with relief that he saw the crowds begin moving to the Quidditch pitch. He had resolutely refused to fly for the alumni team, or to referee the match. He had fulfilled both posts in past years, but he was damned if he would ever again put himself on a broomstick on the same pitch with Sirius Black. Dumbledore had left him in peace, and he saw that Madam Hooch was set to act as referee.

The Hogwarts All-Stars were the best players from each of the four Houses. The celebrity coach for the team was none other than Viktor Krum; Snape sneered when he saw Granger in the forefront of the Gryffindor spectators. If he



remembered that all of her closest friends were playing on the student team, he chose not to admit it. This was just another demonstration of her partiality for the Bulgarian.

The Alumni Team had as their celebrity coach Oliver Wood, the Puddlemere United Keeper. The coach positions for this event were largely honorary; it was another opportunity to involve alumni or other interested parties in the festivities. Snape settled himself in the faculty box and prepared to be bored. He sincerely hoped Potter would catch the Snitch immediately so that the farcical waste of his time would be over.

The game began with Potter, as captain for the All-Stars, and Black, as captain for the Alumni, shook hands, and the balls were released. Black, as a Chaser, could not resist the urge to show off, and he scored the first goal. Ginny Weasley put a neat stop to Black's next attempt, stealing the Quaffle and pelting to the other end of the pitch to score the All-Stars' first goal. The scoring continued, fairly evenly matched. Charlie Weasley and Potter circled the pitch, high above the game below, eyes peeled for the Snitch.

Black had just scored another goal on Ronald Weasley, the All-Stars' Keeper, when Charlie Weasley began a plummeting dive. Potter, slow on the uptake for once, hurtled after the other Seeker, looking desperately for the Snitch. The other players were unaware of the Seekers'



drama, intent as they were on playing their own positions. Ginny Weasley had just caught the Quaffle, passed to her by Vaisey, of Slytherin House, and she was flying purposefully toward the goal. The spectators who were fully aware of the Seekers' race to catch the Snitch, watched in horror as Potter surpassed Charlie Weasley, only to collide with Ginny in midair. Miraculously, they both kept to their brooms. Madam Hooch blew her whistle to stop the game as she flew to check on the colliding team-mates. By the time she reached them, it was necessary to come between them. Charlie Weasley had hold of his sister, who was fighting in his arms and screaming at Potter.

Snape carefully suppressed his satisfaction when Hooch ordered Potter to be put out of the game. Draco Malfoy replaced Potter and play was resumed again. As if in a fury of righteous indignation, Ginny Weasley scored three more goals, one right after the other, after which Malfoy snagged the Snitch from the grasping hand of Charlie Weasley. The spectators came to their feet to cheer the victorious All-Star team, and another Alumni Day came to an end, not a moment too soon for the bored Professor Snape.

In the next moment, before Snape's incredulous eyes, Krum bounded up the stands to Granger, who was clapping and cheering amongst her Gryffindor friends. Krum plucked Granger up into his arms and kissed her flush on the lips.

Snape's mouth contracted into a terse white line and his eyes flashed dangerously. Without speaking a word, Snape brushed past the other teachers in the faculty box and strode away, taking care not to look again in Granger's direction.

Hermione thrust the heels of her hands against Krum's shoulders, startling him into letting her drop to her feet. "Vat?" he demanded, rubbing his shoulder. "Ve von!" "Just don't do that, Viktor — I told you that!"

Krum gave her a cheeky grin and winked. Hermione gave a snort of disgust and pushed past him, to go down to the crowd surrounding the victorious student team.

The next day, Snape instructed his family solicitor to begin the long process of drawing up a marriage contract for Fleur Delacour's family.

August, 1998

Snape raised his face from his hands, which had been applying pressure to the area above his eyebrows, a stragem which sometimes relieved the onset of a building headache. As he uncovered his eyes, he saw that the dawn had

finally broken to end one of the longest nights of his life. He loathed reminiscing in this way; it was a weakness, and weakness was a luxury he could not afford. Decisions, once made, must be followed through. Commitments, once made, must be honoured. Dawdling amongst the memories of happenings no more clear in retrospect than they had been when they occurred was a sure road to madness.

The sun continued to rise, bringing definition, now, to the courtyard below his windows, where tastefully-arranged flowerbeds flanked a charmingly-placed gazebo. He allowed his gaze to travel over the small garden to the wall of the manor across the way. In the window directly opposite his, he spied movement. Curiously, he rose and went to stand fully in his window, straining his eyes to see. The light shifted yet again, relieving him of the glare impeding his line of sight, and he found himself staring across the courtyard into the bedroom window of Hermione Granger, who had obviously sat the night through at her window, just as he had done. Unbeknownst to them both, they had been staring at one another in the hours when their thoughts had kept them from sleeping.

Without realizing he had done so, Snape lifted one hand and pressed his palm flat against the pane of glass, the courtyard distance, and the elements of time and space separating him from her of the strawberries and essence of almond.

After a heart-stopping moment, she stood and came to stand in the window as well. She was staring directly into his eyes. Hermione reached up her hand, and Snape had the insane impression that she would press her palm to his.

She gave a tug, and the heavy draperies began to fall, obscuring her from his view. He had the briefest glimpse of her turning her back on him just before the curtains closed in his face.

HERMIONE HAD no desire to show herself at breakfast that morning, but even less did she desire to draw undue attention to herself by not appearing. After ringing down the curtain on a night of unproductive reminiscences, she had lain in her bed for two hours of fruitless tossing and turning. Eventually, Alicia had climbed out of bed and headed to the shower, then returned ready to hash over the ball. Hermione companionably sat forward and listened to her talk.

“Did you see his face?” Alicia inquired.

“Whose?” Hermione asked, beginning to yank her hair into a plait.

Alicia came up behind her and placed gentle hands over Hermione’s shoulders.

“Let me do that for you,” she urged, taking over the job of smoothing the difficult curls into sections.

Hermione subsided thankfully and allowed Alicia to arrange her hair.

“Did I see whose face?” she repeated again, making an effort to put aside her own misery.

Alicia giggled fondly. “Seamus! He was so shocked when I asked him to dance for the ladies’ choice.”

Hermione smiled. “I don’t think Seamus sees himself as a ‘Smooth Operator,’” she said, generously offering her friend a chance to share confidences.



It had been expected that the young people would be weary from dancing the night through, so an elegant buffet-style brunch was served on the Malfoy Manor terrace. The guests could come out and serve themselves as they desired.

Hermione held out until hunger drove her from her room. With trepidation, she approached the French doors leading out onto the terrace. Halting in the shadows just



within the house, she scanned the group on the terrace for the two people she least wished to encounter. The professor was not present, but Miss Delacour was seated at mid-table. The seats around her were not occupied, but she appeared serenely unconcerned. Her silvery hair was plaited and her robes were demure and unremarkable.

The other guests were scattered about the terrace and out onto the perfectly tended lawn in pairs and small groups. Hermione served herself sparingly from the buffet table, then sought a quiet space on a bench beneath a tree.

Harry, who was sitting with Ron and Shadow, kept an eye on Skye. He had something to say to her, but he did not want to do it in front of other people. It would be nerve-racking enough to say the words without having an audience.

Draco and Luna sat together, their heads bent in private conversation; they were so close it would have been virtually impossible to slip a piece of parchment between them. Their proximity, coupled as it was with frequent hand touching and long, soulful looks, clearly broadcast their desire to be left alone with one another... to everyone but Neville.

Neville Longbottom was like a boy in a bubble. The occurrence the night before with Pansy Parkinson was unparalleled in his experience and he scarcely knew what to do with himself. He had never been aware of a girl liking him in that way before and now he was full of ques-



tions. As Draco was his roommate at Phoenix House, he was very much in the habit of confiding in and seeking counsel from him. Neville's own euphoria made him blind to the exhilaration of his roommate and Luna Lovegood.

Draco was fighting the urge to hit Neville with a Silencing Charm from beneath the table. Why? Why on this, of all mornings, must Neville attach himself to his roommate like a limpet? Draco had something particular he wished to say to Luna, a question to ask, and he meant to be alone with her when he did it.

Sitting at the head of the long, linen-draped table, watching Draco and Luna with ill-concealed bad-humour, was Lucius Malfoy. Had Draco's wits gone begging? *Pure-blood or no, the girl's father runs a tabloid rag of the lowest sort. She is not fit to be a Malfoy*, he thought to himself.

Lucius was interrupted in his dark brooding by the emergence of Sophronia Snape, with Stormy at her heels. Immediately he stood, going forward with his most charming, roguish smile to greet and compliment her.

"You are none the worse for wear after your night of raking," he murmured to her wickedly. "You look lovely, my dear — fresh enough to put these children to shame."

Sophonra smiled at him and answered him lightly, moving past him. "I must prepare a plate for Stormy; she is quite famished this morning."



"Of course!" Lucius said with false heartiness. His long strides carried him to the buffet table and he picked up a plate, humorously assuming the manners of a maitre d' in a fine restaurant. "What would tempt Miss Snape's appetite this morning?"

A frightened house-elf attempted to wrest the plate from his master's hands, but was waved off, and had to content himself with *helping* to serve Stormy's plate.

Stormy regarded this playfulness with some confusion, but she answered Lucius, following him down the length of the table stating her preferences. Unfortunately for Lucius, Sophronia was far too immersed in her own thoughts to properly notice this great show of indulgence to her youngest child by her erstwhile chief suitor.

Minerva McGonagall sat at the other end of the long table, sipping her strong, unsweetened tea and watching Nymphadora Tonks consuming scrambled eggs while glaring at her plate as if it had offended her personally.

"You did not appear to lack for partners last night," she said neutrally, watching Tonks over the edge of her teacup.

Tonks looked up at her. "And you scarcely danced at all, Minerva."

McGonagall shrugged. "A chaperone's duty is to watch after her charges, not to enjoy herself."

Tonks grinned at her. "You looked like you were enjoy-



ing yourself when you danced the tango with Sirius Black.”

McGonagall was quite pleased to see the lightened expression on Tonks’ face. “Sirius Black is a gifted dancer,” she commented.

Tonks glanced down the length of the table. Sophronia had settled Stormy and seated herself at Lucius’ left hand.

“Sophie certainly seemed to think so,” she said mischievously.

“That was her nickname at school,” McGonagall said shortly. “She and Sirius were a couple, on and off, from his third year onward.”

Tonks looked slightly repulsed. “A *third* year going out with a fifth year? That was definitely not done when I was at school.”

McGonagall waved her hand. “Sirius’ birthday is in September and Sophronia’s is in August. There is scarcely more than one year between them in age.”

Tonks gave her a quizzical look. “That’s an odd thing for you to know.”

McGonagall met her eyes with a quelling look before leaning forward to pour herself another cup of tea. “Sophronia just happened to mention it in passing this morning,” she said repressively.

Tonks’ gaze lit upon Hermione, who was returning to the buffet table with her half-empty plate. A helpful house-elf

relieved her of the dirty dish and she poured herself a cup of coffee, adding a dollop of milk and a spoonful of sugar.

“Hermione is looking tired this morning,” McGonagall said.

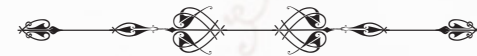
Tonks spoke quietly. “I thought she was my friend.”

McGonagall snorted. “Of course she is your friend, Tonks. Don’t be silly.”

Tonks turned fierce dark eyes upon the older witch. “Have you *seen* her with Remus?”

Minerva McGonagall flashed upon the memory of Hermione dancing past her the night before, wearing Minerva’s own precious faerie silk dress and clinging to the Potions master. Hermione had been held unnaturally close to Severus Snape as they danced the ladies’ choice; something in the tension between them nagged at her mind.

In an uncharacteristic demonstration, McGonagall placed her hand over that of her much younger friend. “Things are not always what they seem, my dear,” she murmured.



Stormy saw Hermione come back up to the buffet table and she bounced excitedly by her mother’s side.

“Mummy, I’m finished eating. May I go talk to Hermione?”

Sophronia inspected the child’s plate and gave her permission. “Don’t plague her, Stormy. Ask if you may speak with her.”

"Yes, ma'am!" Stormy promised, trotting away.

Sophronia turned her attention to her other neighbour at the table. Lucius was sitting with one graceful hand holding his cup of tea, long since grown cold, and watching Draco and Luna.

"I believe they are genuinely fond of one another," Sophronia said quietly.

Lucius regarded her for a moment. "Your gentleness of spirit leads you to believe the best of everyone, my dear," he said caressingly. "It is not your habit to think badly of anyone."

Sophronia laughed. "You have a very peculiar idea of me, Lucius," she said. "I am perfectly capable of discerning the difference between sincerity and pretence."

In some alarm, Lucius' grey gaze sought out her blue eyes. Was she onto him? Had she guessed about Varen's prolonged visit the night before? With consummate skill, he dared to lightly probe her mind. No, she wasn't thinking about Varen; she was thinking about that infernal child of hers.

Abruptly, Sophronia lowered her eyes to her plate. "I believe that Luna worships Draco and that Draco has come to love Luna. I think they could be happy together."

Lucius could not prevent the hateful glance he cast down the table, where Ronald Weasley sat with Shadow Snape. They were not speaking, but were obviously holding hands beneath the table, gazing sadly at one another.

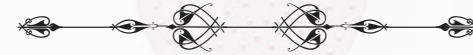


"Just as young Weasley could be happy with your sixteen-year-old daughter?" he said, the sneer upon his lips marring the solicitous tone of his voice.

Sophronia looked at her daughter and felt a sharp thrust of pain in her heart.

"Of course not," she said quietly. "Shadow is too young."

"And Miss Lovegood is too odd," Lucius responded before tossing his napkin onto his plate and striding back into the house.



Skye separated herself from Alicia and Seamus and strolled to the buffet table, picking up a slice of apple and beginning to eat it. Harry deserted Ron and Shadow and walked quickly to Skye's side.

"Morning, Skye," he said quietly.

Skye started and quickly turned to look at him. Her expression was a bit guilty. "Oh! Good morning, Harry," she said.

Harry gestured towards the lawn and the rose garden beyond. "Would you walk with me?"

Skye nodded and they strolled away from the terrace.



Draco saw Harry wandering off with Skye and clenched his teeth to prevent the imprecation he thought from



passing his lips. How was he going to get rid of Neville?

Luna, whose soft heart was touched by Neville's obvious distress, was talking to him about Pansy with utter patience. Draco had a question to ask this morning; he had to find someone else to baby-sit Longbottom.

"Let's go sit with Weasley and Shadow," he suggested cheerfully, standing and waiting for Luna and Neville to follow suit.

"Do you think they might prefer to be left alone?" Luna asked delicately, looking over at the love-sick pair.

As if that matters with this lot, Draco thought savagely.

"No, let's go talk to them," Draco insisted with a Malfoy smile.

Luna could deny him nothing; she promptly rose to follow him around the table, followed by Neville, who still had a catalogue of questions to ask regarding girls in general and Pansy in particular.

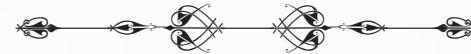


Ginny Weasley, the last of the young people to venture onto the terrace, came outside with a happy smile on her face. Immediately, she scanned the scattered group of her friends until she found Harry — who was walking side-by-side with Skye Snape, heading for the rose garden.

Hurt descended upon her, closely followed by anger. She did not know if she wanted to hex Harry, or Skye, or



both of them. How *could* he? After he had held her and kissed her in the rose garden the night before? After the things he had said to her in the rose garden?



Harry and Skye walked together across the immaculate lawn and the silence between them grew heavier with each step. Harry had no idea how to broach this subject with Skye; their dealings together had been rather superficial and he did not really know how to talk to her. When the weight of the silence became too much for him to bear, he touched her on the arm.

"There's a bench beneath that tree. Why don't we sit down?"

Skye acquiesced and led the way to the seat. They sat beside one another and the oppressive silence continued. Harry finally decided it was better to talk, even if he said something truly stupid.

"Skye," he began hesitantly.

She turned to look at him, and Harry noticed again how pretty she was. The funny thing about it was that he found that he much preferred brown eyes and red hair to Skye's angelic beauty.

"Yes, Harry?"

"Erm, well... I know we've been seeing each other quite a bit," he fumbled. "I like you a lot; I think you're really pretty and really nice."



“Thank you, Harry,” Skye said politely.

“But I really like —”

Skye smiled at him. “But you really like Ginny,” she said.

Harry gaped at her. “You know?”

“Harry,” she said with a chuckle, “everyone knows. It’s not supposed to be a secret, is it?”

Harry grinned at her, his relief evident. “No — but I thought I should let you know...”

Skye patted his arm in a friendly way. “Now you have done the proper thing and you can be quite pleased with yourself,” she said.

Harry was on his feet; he felt like running and laughing and singing at the top of his lungs. If his Firebolt were anywhere close by, he would hurl himself on it and fly in crazy circles. He was far too pleased to worry about Skye taking the mickey.

“Thanks, Skye. I’m going to go walk in the shrubbery, okay?”

Skye smiled and nodded as the Boy Who Lived headed for the decorative walking area winding through the carefully tended shrubbery.

It might have made him feel better if I had told him about Bill, she thought.

Skye saw Ginny standing on the terrace with Hermione; they appeared to be having a rather heated discussion. Skye had completely failed to obtain any useful infor-



mation earlier this morning from Ron about his eldest brother; she had been waiting for Ginny to come down so she could get answers to her questions about Bill.

Skye headed back to the terrace.



Draco settled Neville comfortably beside Shadow, gave Ron an apologetic look, and tugged on Luna’s hand.

“Walk with me in the rose garden,” he whispered to her.

Luna instantly forgot about her other friends and placed her small hand in the larger one Draco held out to her. She was always completely attentive to him; it was one of the things Draco loved most about her. Without an explanation to the others, they walked down the terrace steps, hand-in-hand.

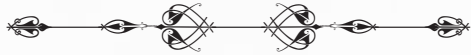
As they walked along, Draco looked down into Luna’s face, unable to tear his gaze away from her. Luna became aware of his regard and looked up to meet his eyes. When Draco clearly saw the love shining there and the tender smile on her lips, he promptly pulled her behind the trunk of the nearest tree and kissed her.

Luna sighed against his lips, twining her arms around his neck. At her sigh, Draco pulled back from her, searching her face carefully. “Is this okay, love? Is it too soon after —”

Luna swayed against him, lifting her face imploringly. “Please kiss me, Draco,” she said.



Draco obliged.



Hermione's head was aching. The sleepless night was the main culprit; not knowing the current location of Professor Snape was also nagging at her, but she was determined *not* to ask where he was. She had managed to eat some breakfast, and she had swallowed two cups of coffee, but she still did not feel well.

Stormy's enthusiastic descent upon her had not been welcome, but she cared for the child too much to repel her. Then Ginny came stomping up to her and began to rant about Harry, unmindful of Stormy's avid interest. Thankfully, Sophronia came up to them then, taking Stormy by the hand and leading her off to begin their packing to return to Grimmauld Place that afternoon.

"Gin," Hermione said, "you mustn't call Harry a scum-sucking sod in front of Stormy," she chided.

"But he *is*, Hermione. He told me —"

"Hi!"

Skye Snape's sweet voice interrupted Ginny's tirade. She rounded to face her tormentor.

"What?" Ginny demanded aggressively. "What do you *want*?"

Skye took a step back, unsure of how to respond to this question.



"Ginny," Hermione said pleadingly. "Gin, come on..."

Ginny pushed Hermione's placating hand from her arm and took a step towards Skye. "You just won't be happy until you have them all, will you?" she hissed at Skye.

"Good morning, ladies," Harry said cheerfully, bounding up the terrace steps. "All right, Ginny?"

Ginny whirled on him, ready in her hurt and her anger to annihilate him.

"Harry Potter, you are a two-timer and a liar. I hate you!"

Harry held his hands up and took a step back. "Gin? What do you —"

"After everything you said to me last night? How dare you?"

Ginny pulled her wand from her sleeve and began to advance on him.

"What is she *doing*?" Skye whispered worriedly to Hermione.

Hermione took Skye by the arm and led her back to the table. "They're fine, Skye; it's just a misunderstanding."

Harry retreated down the terrace steps to the grassy lawn, dividing his attention between Ginny's face and her wand.

"Gin, what are you *on* about? I —"

Ginny's voice reached screech status. "Do you think I'm blind? I *saw* you with her! And as soon as you saw me, you walked off and tried to act like nothing happened!"

"Nothing *did* happen Ginny — dammit! Just shut it for a minute and let me —"



Red sparks were issuing wildly from the tip of Ginny's wand as she followed him down, stopping just beyond arm's reach. "Let you what? Let you lie? I'm sick of your games, Harry James Potter!"

All eyes at the table were now riveted on Harry and Ginny as they faced off at the edge of the terrace steps. Shadow grasped Ron's upper arm anxiously. "Hadn't you better go speak to her?" she asked nervously.

Ron snorted. "I don't want to be hexed! She won't hurt him — much."

Skye, who had joined Hermione in sitting across the table from Ron and Shadow, asked, "Why doesn't he at least pull his wand?"

Ron and Neville looked scandalized.

"You don't draw down on your girlfriend!" Ron sputtered.

Harry apparently agreed with his mate; he was trying to circle to Ginny's right while still talking.

"I was just *talking* to her, Ginny," he reasoned.

"Talking! It *always* starts with talking!" she jeered at him.

"Put down the wand, Ginny," Harry suggested.

"After I finish with you!" Ginny raged, then made a subtle motion with her wrist.

Harry threw himself down and forward, his quick reflexes standing him in good stead once again. He felt the burst of magic skim the tips of his hair as he wrapped his

arms around Ginny's knees and brought her to the ground with him. Quickly, he straddled her and knocked her wand out of her hand before pinning her wrists to the earth.

"I'm in love with you, you wildcat!" he panted. "Now give *over*, Gin!"

Ginny lay upon the grass struggling to throw Harry off of her, the red haze of anger continuing to blur the edges of her vision. Dimly, the words Harry had just uttered penetrated the fog of her rage.

"What?" she gasped.

Harry bent closer so that his nose was mere inches from hers.

"I love you, Ginny — only you. I was just telling Skye, but she already knew."

Ginny stopped struggling and Harry loosened his hold on her arms. She promptly brought her hands up to twine her fingers in his unruly shock of hair, pulling his mouth down to hers, as she said, "You're going to be the death of me, Harry Potter."

He stopped his descent so close to her that his lips moved over hers with the formation of each word.

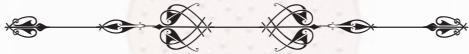
"No, I'm going to be your husband." Then he proceeded to kiss her senseless.

Minerva McGonagall, who had been closely monitoring this altercation, allowed the kiss to go on for a bit,

then broke it up by the mere expedient of calling out, “*Mis-ter Pot-ter!*” in her most outraged accents.

Harry and Ginny scrambled guiltily to their feet, though their hands clasped together instinctively as they faced their accuser.

Ginny blushed scarlet as the occupants of the table burst into spontaneous applause. Harry wrapped a possessive arm about her waist and led her proudly up the terrace steps.



Hermione sat before the mirror at her dressing table on Grimmauld Place. She had managed to sleep for a few hours once they had arrived back in London from Malfoy Manor, but she still felt terrible. The last thing she wanted to do was to be part of the usual Sunday evening festivities. She would have to keep up her playacting with Remus while watching the veela enjoying the favour of Professor Snape — the very notion made her feel ill.

There was a scratching at the door. “Come in,” she said.

It seemed to her as if every girl in the house poured into her room.

Skye came up and leaned over her shoulder, smiling at her reflection in the mirror. “Is your headache any better?” she asked quietly.

Hermione mustered a feeble smile. “Some,” she admitted.



Ginny appeared over her other shoulder. “Not by much,” she said, smoothing a strand of hair out of Hermione’s face. “Do you want to stay up here? We can tell everyone that you aren’t well.”

Shadow opened Hermione’s closet and began to inventory the contents. “I wish Mum would let me borrow from you like Skye does,” she said wistfully.

“She will when you leave school, Shay,” Skye consoled her.

“When I leave school I won’t have Hermione’s closet in the same house to borrow her things!” Shadow objected.

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment, then said, “No, but you’ll have Fleur’s closet handy, and from what I’ve seen, she has loads of sexy things.”

There was a general snort of disgust in the room, quickly interrupted by Shadow.

“Oh! I forgot to tell you!”

She abandoned the closet and threw herself on Hermione’s bed; Ginny, Skye, and Hermione turned to her attentively.

“I heard the strangest thing this morning,” she said. “I was in that little music room, the one with the piano, right next to Mr. Malfoy’s library?”

The other girls nodded their remembrance of the room in question.

“I had been in there playing on the piano, but had stopped, and was just looking out the window —”



“— brooding,” Ginny supplied helpfully.

Shadow made a face at her. “I was quiet, so there was no way to know I was in there. And I heard Severus and Fleur in the library.”

Hermione immediately became more alert.

“The thing that was so strange about it was that Severus was speaking to her in French,” Shadow continued.

“Severus speaks French?” Hermione asked in surprise.

“Papa made sure we all speak French,” Skye said. “We girls had the same French master that Severus had before he went to Hogwarts.”

Shadow cleared her throat impatiently. “Anyway, I don’t suppose I would have paid much mind to them if he hadn’t been speaking to her in French.”

Skye looked puzzled. “Why would he do that?”

“He said he didn’t want there to be any misunderstanding of what he wished to say to her,” Shadow answered.

Hermione knew she should interrupt now and tell them it was wrong to gossip about their brother’s private affairs, but she could not bring herself to do it.

“What *did* he say to her?” Skye demanded.

Shadow leaned forward eagerly. “Well, I didn’t understand everything they said; he spoke a little too quickly and I didn’t know some of the words. But she must have done something after the ball last night to make him *really* angry with her!”

Ginny sounded gleeful. “What did she do?”

“First, he told her about what happened with Val and Luna. Severus took Val back to Mr. Delacour and told him that if he ever sees Val in Britain again that Val will go to prison! And, Severus told Mr. Delacour about how he saved Val from Ron and Harry and Draco. Fleur sounded really upset and she didn’t even try to defend her brother — do you think she knows what he’s like?”

“If she does, then she’s as bad as her brother is,” Ginny said angrily. “Taking him around other girls without warning anyone? That’s inexcusable!”

“What else did he say?” Skye asked.

“He lit into her about that improper dress she wore to the ball and said that it was a disgrace to him and to both of the families and that he wouldn’t stand for it. He told her off for coming into his room uninvited — he said that her ‘dramatic antics are uncalled-for and demeaning.’” On the last part, Shadow managed a fair imitation of her brother’s tones. “He said that his wife would *never* behave in such an unseemly manner, if she wished to please him!”

Hermione’s heart was racing and she could barely catch her breath.

“What did she say then?” Skye demanded anxiously.

“She sounded like she was really close to tears and she begged his pardon and promised to be good,” Shadow said sadly.

Ginny looked confused. "She came into his bedroom in the middle of the night and he yelled at her?"

Shadow nodded. "That's what it sounded like to me," she said. "Then he thanked her, when she said she would not do anything else to displease him, and told her that he would be out of town for a few days on family business."

With sudden energy, Hermione popped up from her seat and walked to her closet, throwing open the doors to survey her clothing.

"I'm sure we can find something for you to wear that your mama would not object to, Shadow," she said, flipping through her dresses.

Ginny looked at her oddly. "Is your headache better?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," Hermione said with a little smile.



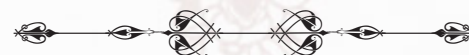
That evening found the ladies of Grimmauld Place entertaining their friends informally, as they did every Sunday. The large game table was set up and stocked with Pick Up Stix. Stormy was at one end of the long table, scarcely able to contain her excitement as she waited for the others to finish eating and to join her. Her only two companions thus far were Sirius Black, who was keeping her entertained with silly stories, and Fleur Delacour,



who was studiously ignoring Sirius while attending solicitously to Stormy's every word.

Though no one had spoken of it, Fleur's change of appearance was striking. Her hair was dressed very simply, with an Alice band holding it back from her face; she was wearing nicely tailored but very plain robes in a flattering shade of blue.

Skye led Bill Weasley into the room, speaking with him quietly as they sat together on a sofa. As the Weasleys, the elder Snape sisters, and Harry Potter had chatted together in the dining room while eating their casual supper, Bill had been filled in on the gossip of Fleur's chastisement. Fleur had nodded to him politely, if distantly, as he walked past her; it was rather amusing, considering the nature of their previous acquaintance, to see how aloofly she treated him.



"Where's Luna?" Alicia asked as she settled at the game table next to Seamus.

Ginny's smile was luminous. "She and Draco are with Mr. Lovegood, tonight."

"Did he propose to her?" Viktor Krum inquired, leaning around Tonks to speak to Ginny.

"Yes, but they won't announce it until Mr. Lovegood agrees," Ginny answered him, darting a glance at Harry.

Harry took her hand and smiled into her eyes. "Too bad



your parents were out tonight," he said quietly.

"Harry —" Ginny's voice broke a little.

"It'll be okay, Gin," he said calmly. "Everything will work out."

Viktor gifted Neville with one of his wicked smiles. "Where is your lovely partner from last night?"

Neville gulped audibly. "She — she said she should stay home with her parents tonight, to tell them that Draco is engaged to someone else."

"Have you talked to her today?" Alicia asked him curiously.

"No, not since last night," Neville said sorrowfully.

"But Draco wasn't engaged last night," Seamus objected.

Neville looked a bit puzzled, then shrugged. "Pansy said he was," he said firmly.

Tonks snorted. "It sounds to me as if Pansy knows Draco pretty well."

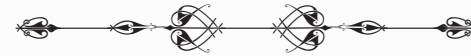
Krum laughed too, taking Tonks' small hand and pressing a kiss to it. "It sounds to *me* as if she knows her *parents* very vell," he said.

Tonks flushed and looked involuntarily over at Remus Lupin, who was sitting and conversing with Professor McGonagall. When she found his unwavering topaz eyes riveted upon her, she tilted her chin defiantly and leaned up to kiss Viktor on the cheek.

Viktor looked surprised and gratified; Lupin, however



turned pointedly away and continued his conversation with McGonagall, a faint frown marring his brow.



Hermione came into the room, closely followed by Percy Weasley. Percy had devoted himself entirely to Hermione from the first moment of his arrival that evening. He insisted upon serving her plate from the buffet table, then he sat at her elbow and monopolized her attention. As Hermione entered the sitting room and saw Fleur, with her hair and clothes befitting a matron twice her age, she was seized with inspiration.

"Percy," she said, turning to him with a smile.

Percy smiled back at her. "Yes, Hermione?"

Hermione spoke softly, so that Percy was obliged to lean in close to her to hear her words. "Miss Delacour is looking so lonely this evening, without her fiancé — would you be so kind as to sit with her and keep her company for me?"

Percy took a deep breath and his chest filled with self-importance. "You may depend upon me," he promised, before seating himself next to Fleur.

Hermione spied Remus Lupin sitting across the room with Sophronia and Minerva McGonagall. She made her way over to him and sat beside him on the sofa.

"Where were you when I needed you?" she demanded



with mock indignation.

Lupin cast a humorous glance towards Percy. "Staying well out of the line of fire," he responded.

"Well, I certainly don't call that *helpful*," she retorted.

McGonagall surveyed them shrewdly as Sophronia choked back a little laugh. The room then became entirely silent as Lucius Malfoy entered, pausing in the doorway to look about him. The sneer which came to him when he discerned Sirius Black softened to a smile when his eyes came to rest on Sophronia's serene countenance. Nodding a greeting to the game players, he trod across to press a kiss to the hand of his hostess.

"It seems an age since I saw you last," he murmured with an incorrigible gleam.

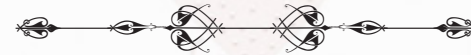
"Rather than just since lunch?" she responded lightly, removing her hand from his grasp. "Please, sit down," she added.

Lucius disposed himself on the sofa at her side and Sophronia felt a tiny pang. He was so very handsome, and he had gone out of his way for the last several weeks to please her in every way. It would give her pain, but she could not accept him, now, if he were to offer for her.

Her eyes wandered to Sirius Black, who was entirely focussed on the pile of coloured plastic sticks before him, joking with Stormy as he attempted to remove one without dislodging the others. No one could say that Sirius

was less handsome than Lucius; only that their patrician good looks differed, with one so fair, and the other so dark. The divergence came not so much in degree of physical beauty, nor even in magnitude of allure, for they both could be said to possess an excess of charm. The variation came in how and why they appealed to Sophronia. She knew that her attraction to Sirius was much stronger; she simply could not yet say why this was so.

Lucius noted her line of sight and his lips tightened in annoyance. Sirius, however, was entirely oblivious of her attention, so occupied was he with Stormy and the Pick Up Stix.



Shadow and Ron sat together on a settee in an arrangement before the hearth, at some distance from both the chaperones at one end of the room, and from the game table at the other end of the room. Ron furtively held Shadow's hand and spoke to her in an urgent tone.

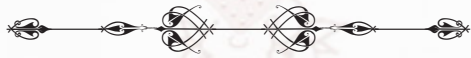
"Don't be silly. I won't look at my mum's *stupid* list of girls to find one to marry. I only want *one* girl for my wife, and I'm not giving up, Shay."

Shadow turned tragic eyes to his beloved face. "Look at Luna and Draco! Look at Ginny and Harry! We will *never* be like they are. They're so lucky! Everyone thinks it's just wonderful that they've fallen in love and gotten

engaged. I'm just one year too young and my mum and Severus behave as if I am *ten* years too young. They will never give their consent, Ron."

As Shadow finished on a querulous, tearful note, Ron hastily retrieved a handkerchief from his inner pocket and passed it to her. Ever since his romance with Shadow had begun, he had developed the habit of carrying a handkerchief. Shadow never seemed to have one, though she frequently needed one. He dimly hoped that she would not cry so often when they were married.

"It has to work out, Shay," he murmured, patting her surreptitiously on the back. "It has to."



Bill Weasley sat beside Skye, eyes hungrily consuming her lovely face, while he simultaneously absorbed the gentleness radiating from her. Ah, he was a dog to benefit from the situation Snape had presented to him, by asking him to stay in Grimmauld Place for the next three nights to help McGonagall guard over the young ladies. How to press his advantage without overstepping the bounds of propriety?

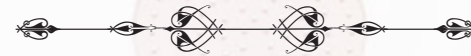
Who would have thought that a creature who was as comforting as an angel could elicit such primal desire in him? Was he a beast to wish to possess such beauty, imbued with infinite peace?



No! He was very much in the right of this, he was sure of it, for who could possibly appreciate her as he did? Now he simply had to secure her for his own, before some other man discovered her and stole her away from him.

Simple? Yeah, right, Bill, he thought.

It was a tricky precipice to tread, between attentive courtliness and deferential respect. Difficult, but not impossible. Percy was not the only diplomat in the family, after all.



"I won! I won!" Stormy squealed, watching Sirius botch his last move, sending several sticks tumbling.

Sirius looked humorously indignant. "Must you announce my shortcomings to the entire world?"

Stormy giggled and bounced out of her seat, circling behind Sirius' chair. "I beat you! I am the champion!"

Fleur spoke up kindly. "Not too loudly, Stormy. Young ladies must be polite, even when they win."

Stormy continued unabated, oblivious to Fleur's unusually quiet protestations. Sirius cast Fleur a look of amused derision, then proceeded to demonstrate how to manage an over-excited Stormy.

"You have not established your supremacy over all-comers yet, Miss Snape. You must give Miss Delacour a chance to unseat you." Stormy willingly returned to her



seat as Sirius set about preparing the Pick Up Stix for another game. "Let us see if she is more adept at managing bits of plastic than she is at managing... *other things*."

Fleur began to play with Stormy as if Sirius had not spoken, but Percy spoke up indignantly. "I say, Sirius! No call for that kind of talk!"

Sirius gave Percy a twisted smile, but made no reply. He moved over to stand behind Stormy's chair, crouching so that they were on the same level, and began to instruct and encourage her. When Stormy won again, she cast her arms about Sirius' neck and squealed with such delight that all eyes in the room were upon her.

Sirius emitted his great, barking laugh and whirled Stormy in a small circle. As he did so, his eyes met Sophronia's, and the glance they exchanged in that moment would have melted steel.

Sirius set Stormy back upon the ground and knelt to her eye level. "All right, you are now the undisputed champion, and I did promise that you might have whatever you wanted if you won."

Stormy sparkled in her glee. "Then you will come with us to the zoo on Wednesday!"

Sirius placed his right hand over his heart and bowed his head. "I shall not fail you, Miss Stormy. I shall be there."

Lucius Malfoy had surged to his feet at the exchange of

passionate looks between the woman he wanted and the puppy-dog of Azkaban.

"It is late," he ground out, holding hard to his composure. "I shall bid you good-night."

Lupin stood also. "It is time the boys and I were gone, too. It has been a long weekend."

The young men of Phoenix House began to say their adieux to the young ladies of Grimmauld Place and the crowd began milling out of the sitting room and down to the door. For a moment, in the middle of the movement, Lucius and Sirius stood face-to-face.

"Bad move, Malfoy," Sirius murmured, pretending to be busy returning the Pick Up Stix to their colourful container.

"I do not know your meaning," Lucius spat.

"Retreating and leaving me with a clear field to be the last to say good-night to her? Tsk, tsk."

Lucius' grip tightened on his ebony cane, which he lifted ever so slightly, before moving past Sirius disdainfully.

"Commoner," he muttered maliciously, for Sirius' ears alone.

"Arrogant prig," Sirius responded, his eyes innocently glued to the task before him.

Lupin, who had been close enough to hear the last exchange, stepped between the two men.

"Neither the time, nor the place," he said with quiet authority.

Lucius exited the room without another word.

“Nice work, Moony,” Sirius said with a grin.

“Oh, grow up, Sirius,” Lupin said with some degree of disgust.

Sirius looked up in surprise, then saw that Lupin’s eyes were glued to Tonks, who had been backed into a corner by Krum and was flirting outrageously.

“She knows you’re watching her,” Sirius murmured.

Lupin jerked his attention away and began to collect his charges from around the room.

Stormy was excitedly recounting the play-by-play of her victory to Hermione. Sophronia approached them and placed one hand affectionately upon her daughter’s shoulder.

“It is past your bedtime, Stormy,” she said.

Hermione glanced over at Sirius, who was dawdling over the chore of tidying the game table. “I’ll take her up and tuck her in,” she said. “Stormy and I will enjoy that very much.”

“Yes, Mummy, let Hermione take me!” Stormy begged.

Sophronia smiled. “Very well.”

Hermione swung the spindly eight-year-old up and headed for the stairs, wishing her departing friends good-night as she passed through them.

Stormy rested her head upon Hermione’s shoulder. “Why are there so few people here tonight? Where are all of our friends?”

Hermione chuckled. “Well, many of our friends have become engaged, and some of them have gotten married. They are with each other.”

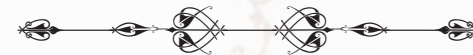
Stormy tightened her hold on Hermione. “You won’t do that, will you Hermione? Marry some icky boy and go away?”

Fleur, who was lingering in the hallway, looked up sharply as she heard Stormy’s words.

“Do not put yourself about, Miss Granger; I will be happy to put Stormy to bed,” Fleur said, reaching out her arms imperiously, apparently expecting Hermione to obey her without question.

Stormy squirmed out of Hermione’s arms, as if to prevent Fleur from obtaining possession of her. “I’ll meet you in the nursery, Hermione!” she piped, scampering up the stairs.

Hermione looked into the veela’s blue eyes. “It appears that *some* members of the Snape family do not care to have you enter their bedrooms uninvited.”



Having waved the Phoenix House men through the fence connecting the two back gardens, Bill and Skye lingered beneath the dark of the moon, admiring the stars.

“Is it true?” Skye asked him. “Are you going to stay here, in Severus’ place, whilst he is away?”

Bill smiled down at her. “It is indeed true.”

Skye stepped a little closer to him, feeling rather bold. "It will be lovely, having you here all the time."

Bill saw the longing in her face, and for a moment he imagined taking her in his arms and kissing her perfect little mouth. Instead, he put his hand in the small of her back and began to walk back to the door that led into the solarium.

"I am here as your protector, Miss Snape, not as your suitor."

Skye stopped dead in her tracks and stared at him. "Oh, no!" she lamented.

Bill tucked her unresisting hand in the crook of his arm and began walking to the house again.

"My thoughts exactly," he agreed.



Minerva McGonagall exited the emptied sitting room, but not before saying, "Don't keep her up all night!" to an obedient Sirius Black.

"I promise I won't, ma'am."

McGonagall snorted, whether in amusement or disapproval it was not clear — but she did close the door behind her as she departed.

Sirius watched Sophronia as she moved aimlessly about the room now, her nervousness bringing a feeling of tenderness to season the desire banked within him.



"Your girls are beautiful, Sophie. I can see why you love them so much."

Sophronia stopped her wandering and looked at him with a soft, happy smile. "I am very proud of them. They are my life, Siri."

Slowly, he began to approach her, watching for signs of objection or displeasure.

"They *should* be your life, Sophie. I would have given anything I had to have my mother love me the way you love your children."

Sophronia's ready sympathy leapt to the fore. "Poor Siri," she murmured as he stopped before her. She reached up and brushed his over-long fringe from his forehead. "She was so unkind to you."

Sirius captured her hand and pressed his lips to her palm; he could not but be aware of how she trembled.

"But you were always kind, Sophie. Always accepting — including when I was an idiot."

She flowed into his arms even as he reached for her, and his lips found hers for the first time in twenty-two years. By the time the long, gently exploring kiss ended, Sophronia's knees were too weak to properly support her and so she held onto Sirius. She tilted her chin to look at him when she heard his chuckle.

"That summer in London, you used to get all quivery



when we kissed, just like this," he whispered.

Her eyes closed blissfully. "I remember," she whispered back. "I *always* remembered, Siri."

He began to stroke her hair. "Did your husband —"

"No."

"Not even —"

"No."

She reached for him greedily and he complied, kissing her until they were both breathless and shaking.

Sirius emitted a ragged breath. "Sophie..."

"Come upstairs with me," Sophronia said.

"God, no!" Sirius exclaimed. "Minerva would have my ears in a jar!"

Sophronia held tightly to him and shuddered her acceptance. "You're right, you're right, I know you're right," she muttered like a mantra.

Sirius took a step away from her, keeping a hand on her until he was sure she could stand without support. "You had best go upstairs while I can still let you go," he said.

Sophronia turned limpid bluebell eyes upon him. "When will I see you again?"

Sirius struggled against the urge to take her back into his arms. "You'll see me every day," he told her.

Sophronia nodded, gathering the shreds of her maturity and dignity about her as she forced herself to walk

away from Temptation Incarnate.

"Sophie?"

She stopped and turned back to him, knowing that her answer to any question on his lips was, "Yes."

"I just want you to know that I am going to marry you and be a good father to your daughters. I don't care who else has been courting you, or what anyone else, including your stepson, has to say about it. It's going to happen. I will *not* lose you again."

Sophronia felt the cloud within which she was dwelling lift a few more feet into the air.

"Good-night, Siri," she said before leaving him standing in the middle of his own sitting room like a man enchanted to stone.

POP, NOT UNLIKE the sound a butterbeer cork makes as it exits the bottle, echoed through the little copse of trees just beyond the Burrow.

Harry Potter Apparated amongst the trees with his fiancée in his arms. Ginny staggered as they appeared and Harry kept a firm grip on her.

"Are you okay, Gin?" he asked.

She nodded. "I just hate Side-Along, that's all. I can't wait to take my test so I can do this by myself!"

Harry slipped from beneath the Invisibility Cloak. "Are you sure you want to wait here?"

Ginny nodded again, then realised that he could no longer see her. "Yes, I'm sure. If they agree to it, come to the door and call for me — then I'll come in."

Harry smiled and shook his head as he walked away from her, into the Weasleys' back garden and up to the back door. Standing straight and tall, he briskly knocked on the door.

Molly Weasley pulled the door open almost immediately, unmindful of her dressing gown and the morning muss of her greying red hair.

"Harry dear!" she said in some surprise. "Good morning!" She stood on tip-toe and looked over his shoulder. "Is Ron —?"

"Ron isn't with me, Mrs. Weasley," Harry told her. "I've come about Ginny."

Molly dropped the spatula she was holding and uttered a tiny scream. "What's happened to Ginny? Is she at headquarters?"

Arthur Weasley appeared behind his wife, a tall, balding wizard with ginger hair going grey and a kind expression on his face. He placed his hands on Molly's shoulders and squeezed gently.

"Let the boy in, my love," he said, reaching past her to offer his hand to Harry. "Good morning, Harry."

Harry shook the proffered hand and grinned at Ginny's father. "Good morning, sir," he said, slipping past Molly and entering the Weasley kitchen.

As he passed Molly she whirled and looked at the clock on the wall. Harry followed her line-of-sight and saw that Ginny showed as "travelling." Apparently relieved to see that her only daughter was not registering on her clock as "in mortal peril," Molly recollected herself.

"Please, Harry, sit down. Arthur and I were just finishing up breakfast. Are you hungry? Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Thanks, Mrs. Weasley, but I ate before I left Phoenix House. I wouldn't mind a cup of tea, though."

Arthur indicated a place at the table, then sat down across from Harry. "Did you enjoy the weekend in the country?"

Harry nodded. "Malfoy Manor is a really posh place, isn't it?"

Arthur's eyes crinkled in amusement. "I suppose it is; I've only ever been there to take up the floorboards and to look for contraband."

Molly joined them with a fresh pot of tea and some biscuits on a plate. She poured the tea, then sat at the end of the table with Arthur on her left and Harry on her right.

"But what *about* Ginny?" she asked a little desperately.

Arthur placed a calming hand on Molly's arm and gave

Harry a rueful smile. "Yes, Harry — tell us about Ginny."

Harry pushed the chipped china teacup to one side and looked Arthur Weasley in the eye.

"Mr. Weasley, Ginny and I love one another. I am here to ask your permission to marry her."

Molly uttered another small scream, then quieted at the firm pressure from Arthur's hand.

"Isn't this rather sudden, Harry? The last time we saw you and Ginny, she was dividing her attention between Seamus and Draco and you were courting Skye Snape." Arthur's tone was firm, though no less kind.

"No, sir, I don't believe our loving one another is sudden — I just think our realising it is." Harry paused for a moment. "Ginny knew her mind before I did, Mr. Weasley; she's been trying to let me know how she feels for years. When I was dense about it, she got angry with me — and we've been going around each other in circles ever since." Harry risked a glance at Molly, who was watching him with a mixture of understanding and dismay. "This law has a way of clearing up the unimportant issues in a hurry."

Molly spoke quietly. "It's true, Arthur. About Ginny, I mean. She's loved him since she was a wee thing — she explained it to me when I fussed at her for changing boy-friends so often. 'I'm just killing time 'til Harry gets a clue, Mum,' she told me." Her voice faded and she pulled

a handkerchief from the pocket of her dressing gown, dabbing at her eyes.

Arthur slid his hand up Molly's arm to her shoulder, where he began to rub comforting circles on her back. His eyes, however, never left Harry's face.

"Harry, *you* have to marry before the New Year, but Ginny has another full year before she has to be married. *She* has no need to rush into anything. When you marry, you're going to be with the same person for the rest of your life. Both you *and* Ginny deserve to be happy — it would just be tragic for you to rush into marriage and then find out you're wrong."

Harry's carefully rehearsed speech deserted him as he earnestly pled for his and Ginny's happiness; as he responded, he poured his heart into his words. "I think it would be tragic to marry someone other than Ginny and live a life of regret. Mr. Weasley, I understand why you're worried, but I love her and I have the funds to take care of her — I inherited gold from my parents. I promise I will honour and protect her for the rest of our lives."

Arthur seemed to be wavering. "Ginny has a terrible temper, Harry. She isn't easy to manage."

Harry grinned. "I've handled some difficult characters before, sir."

Molly's eyes were riveted on Harry as he spoke of his love

for her daughter. A woman with six sons develops a second sense for genuine emotion. She reached out and gave Harry a motherly pat upon the hand. When he looked into her face, she gave him an encouraging smile, full of affection.

“He killed You-Know-Who, Arthur. I imagine he can deal with Ginny,” she said mildly.

Arthur broke into a full smile. “We’ve loved you as one of our sons for a long time, Harry — certainly since you saved Ginny from the Basilisk. There isn’t anyone I’d rather give her to, if I were sure that your feelings are true and not a whim.”

The points Harry had discussed with Sirius sprang into his mind. “We’d be happy to enter the binding engagement and wait until Ginny leaves school to be married, sir,” he said.

There was an exclamation from outside the door, which promptly burst open. At first there was no one there; then, Ginny pulled the Invisibility Cloak from her body and tossed it onto the table, where it came to rest over the teapot, with one corner dipping into Harry’s full teacup.

“I don’t *want* to wait a year to be married!” Ginny objected vociferously. “We can live in the married students’ dormitory. There’s no *reason* to wait!”

Harry hastily rescued the tip of his Invisibility Cloak from the teacup; Arthur and Molly stood and surged around the table to pull their daughter into a group hug.

“You need to take better care of that cloak, Ginny; they’re frightfully rare!” Molly sobbed as Arthur beamed at her with suspiciously bright eyes.

Harry smiled into Ginny’s bemused face from his place at the table, feeling a warmth suffuse him from the top of his head to the tips of his toes. This place, which was where he had felt the safest and the most loved of any place in his world, was going to be *his* home, as well as Ginny’s. He was going to be a real member of this family.

“I told you, Gin,” he said hoarsely. “I told you it would all be okay.”

Ginny stepped away from Arthur and Molly and Harry rose from his chair to meet her. Her parents slipped their arms about one another as they watched Ginny burst into tears of relief upon the chest of her husband-to-be.



The elderly wizarding solicitor made a last note to himself, then looked at his client over his spectacles. “Those are all of the pending issues on the estate, sir. Was there anything else?”

The dour man across the desk crossed one slender leg over the other. “I have cause to be displeased with the inquiries made on my behalf in France.”

The solicitor pursed his lips and removed his eyeglasses. “Indeed, sir? In what way were you dissatisfied?”

“The son of the family has a history of being expelled from schools for molesting young women,” the younger wizard sneered.

“Oh, dear-dear-dear,” the solicitor said, pulling a file from the drawer of his desk. “Quite a reputable firm they are, sir. We’ve never had a speck of trouble before, using their services.”

The sneer became more pronounced. “There is a first time for everything, Butterman. I will require the name and direction of the firm in question.”

Butterman’s alarm was evident. “But, what do you mean to do, sir?”

The sneer was replaced by dramatically rolled eyes. “Not the mayhem you apparently expect, you old fool. I intend to follow up with them and to determine for myself if there is any *further* information missing from the ‘exhaustive’ report which I requested and failed to receive.”

Thus chastised, the solicitor passed a card across to his unpleasant — but remunerative — client. Long fingers accepted the business card, tucking it away into the folds of the layers of black-on-black clothing. The smaller man now cleared his throat nervously. “And, is there anything *else*, sir?”

The disagreeable fellow shifted in his chair, as if suddenly uncomfortable.

“Tell me, Butterman, what are the conditions under which the contract I have signed becomes void?”

The solicitor replaced his spectacles on his wrinkled face, feeling he was now back in his preferred element.

“Nothing will naturally void the contract, sir, save the death of yourself or the young lady.” Seeing the glare directed at him, Butterman hurried on. “Of course, either party could choose to void the contract under certain circumstances. For instance, if it were to be found that you, sir, had misrepresented your economic status, the young lady could choose to void the contract. If, however, *she* were willing to go forward with the agreement in *spite* of said misrepresentation, *you* would still be bound.” Butterman glanced at his client to make sure the scowling young man understood him.

The intense black eyes regarding him showed no sign of confusion. With a disdainful curl of his lip, the client inquired, “And what are the circumstances under which it would be *my* prerogative to invalidate the contract?”

The solicitor frowned. “Sir — are you contemplating this? I was under the impression that this engagement was of your seeking?”

The voice in which the client spoke was at once silken and menacing. “I believe that the question was a simple one, Butterman.”

“Of course, sir.” Butterman busied himself with replacing the file he had earlier removed from his desk. “You would be justified at law in voiding the contract if the family mis-

represented their financial resources or the settlement upon the young lady. If the young woman were discovered *en flagrante delicto* you could terminate the contract; however, there must be no fewer than two unrelated witnesses willing to testify to the fact, should the lady's family challenge you." Butterman looked back at his client's face. "Any criminal behaviour by the young lady would entitle you to break the contract." He paused for a moment, speaking the next words with great delicacy. "It is possible, sir, at any time before the actual binding takes place, for the two of you to mutually agree to cancel the contract. You could, perhaps, approach the young lady..."

The younger man gained his feet with such speed that Butterman was surprised into a gasp.

"Don't be absurd, Butterman," the client said, as he strode to the door. "A gentleman never withdraws from an engagement."

Butterman sighed with relief as the heavy office door closed behind the son and heir of one of his oldest friends. He never would have believed he'd say it, but it was definitely true: Sandoval Snape had been a world-class bastard, but his son made him seem like a jolly old Father Christmas.



Inspiration hit Sirius as he sipped a cup of tea with



Sophronia over the breakfast table at Grimmauld Place on Monday morning. Minerva had sniffed when she entered the dining room to find Sirius there before her.

"Are we to be graced with your presence at breakfast, lunch and supper now?" she demanded crossly as she took her seat at the foot of the table.

Sirius had jumped to his feet to pull her chair out for her; as she graciously accepted his assistance, he pushed her chair in, then dropped a kiss on her temple.

"And tea, Minerva. Don't forget tea," he teased her, resuming his seat next to Sophronia.

The old lady glared as she accepted the cup of tea poured for her by Sophronia. "None of your cheek to *me*, Sirius Black; I know precisely what you're up to. Do not think you'll get around me with your cozening ways."

"Yes, Professor," Sirius murmured wickedly.

Minerva gave him a forbidding glare, then turned her attention to Sophronia. "Where are our young ladies this morning?"

Sophronia ticked them off on her fingers. "Luna stayed the night last night with her father and she hasn't come in yet. Ginny and Harry went to see the Weasleys this morning about their engagement. Stormy has eaten and is upstairs in the nursery. Tonks and Bill Weasley left early this morning for their jobs. I haven't seen the others; they are sleeping in, I suppose."



Minerva sighed. "I am dreading the party at Blue Hill tonight."

Sophronia frowned. "Isn't that Trenton Avery's home in town? I am sure Mr. Snape took me there to visit, one time. Why do you dread it?"

Sirius looked at her serene countenance and felt emotion flood his chest. She spoke of that autocratic old man who had been her husband as if he had been a distant acquaintance, and she was completely unaware of how odd she sounded, doing so. He was moved to reach over and take her hand, which caused her to turn her attention to him. Sirius could not speak to her of his thoughts in front of Minerva; he settled for a tender look and a gentle squeeze of her hand.

Minerva watched their interplay with inward approbation. She was inordinately fond of them both and believed that they were perfectly suited to one another; furthermore, they both deserved some happiness in this life. Outwardly she snorted. "Sirius, kindly save your lovemaking for a time when you do *not* have an audience," she said sourly.

Sirius ignored her and answered his Sophie's question instead. "Minerva dreads going to Blue Hill because Trenton's cousin and uncle were both known Death Eaters. Trenton and his wife, Miranda, were never implicated in any wrong-doing, but Dumbledore suspected them of being financial supporters of Voldemort. We expect

there to be a number of people present at the party who were close associates of Death Eaters."

Sophronia shuddered but did not object when Sirius spoke the Dark Lord's name aloud. "I don't understand. Why would we take the girls to such a place?"

Minerva had a pinched look about her face. "Albus feels it is important that we not appear to openly scorn these people. The war is over, the Death Eaters are defeated; we should be gracious in victory, while continuing to be vigilant."

And Sirius had his inspiration. "Have you written to accept the invitation?"

Sophronia shook her head. "It is not usual to do so, though one generally writes to decline an invitation."

Sirius stood and walked to the sideboard, opening one of the small drawers near the bottom and rummaging about. After a moment, he returned to his place at table, proudly bearing a piece of parchment and a quill in one hand and a bottle of ink in the other.

"Write to the Averys and decline on behalf of the young ladies; you have a previous engagement," he said, removing the cap from the bottle of ink.

Sophronia accepted the quill with a puckered brow. "But we don't, Sirius. The Avery party is the only entertainment on the Ministry calendar for tonight."

Sirius grinned humorously. "Yes, you *do* have a previous

engagement. You are attending *my* private theatre party this evening, followed by an elegant supper at Claridge's."

Minerva dropped the fork with which she had been eating a fried egg; it hit her plate with a clatter. "Claridge's? Sirius, have you lost your senses?"

Sophronia was looking at him with undisguised admiration. "What a clever idea! There can be no objection to our missing the Avery party if we have a private engagement of our own." She bent her head and dipped the quill in the inkstand, beginning to write a note to send to Blue Hill.

"But, Sirius! The expense!" Minerva objected weakly. "There will be nearly twenty of us!"

"Don't fret, Minerva. The expense is no bother. Bertie Merrythought has a Squib cousin who works in catering at Claridge's; he'll be able to help me arrange things at the last minute." Sirius stood and paced behind Sophronia for a moment. "Sophie, we'll need to send an owl to Pansy Parkinson's parents, asking permission for her to accompany us — in fact, why don't you see if they'll permit her to come for a stay?"

Sophronia smiled and kept on writing. "That will make Neville happy."

He stroked a finger down her cheek and her eyes drifted closed; she leaned her head into his hand, the quill resting in her fingers.

Sirius spoke very softly. "Please say that Shadow can come, too."

An indefinable look of sadness passed over Sophronia's face as her eyes opened and she began to write again. "I can see no objection to Shadow accompanying her mama to the theatre in a private party," she said quietly.

Sirius gently pressed her shoulder. "Thank you," he murmured.

Voices were heard in the corridor, then Hermione, Alicia, Skye, and Shadow tumbled into the room, all talking at once. Sirius returned their cheerful greetings and passed through them, pausing in the doorway to speak to the room at large.

"Ladies, please be prepared to leave at six this evening. Dress will be Muggle smart, so get busy Transfiguring. I must away — I have a few details to which I must attend." With one final, devastatingly handsome smile for his Sophie, Sirius was gone.



Percy Weasley cheerfully mounted the steps to the first floor sitting room at Grimmauld Place. The house-elf had gone to notify Hermione that he had arrived. Restlessly, he paced the floor of the sitting room, occasionally stopping to admire his reflection in the mirror over the

mantle. When he heard her steps behind him, he turned to Hermione with a confident smile.

Hermione smiled back. "Good morning, Percy."

He walked over to her. "Are you ready to go?"

Hermione looked puzzled. "Go? Go where?"

Percy gestured toward one of the windows that looked out on the derelict square. "You agreed to walk with me in the park this morning — had you forgotten?"

Hermione vaguely remembered agreeing to walk in the park, hoping to stave off other, less welcome offers from him. "Of course! Let me just run up to change."



They Apparated to the wizarding section of Hyde Park and began to stroll about the Promenade, nodding to acquaintances they passed. Percy was expounding at length on his situation in America, where he worked as a junior British attaché to the Salem Witches' Institute. He was explaining how much more modern American wizards were than here, at home. Hermione made appropriate murmurs, letting her mind dwell on more pressing problems. She was startled out of her musings when she heard the words "honour" and "marry." Struggling to keep her annoyance hidden, she rounded on Percy and declined his offer as politely as she could.



Percy stared at her for a moment, a look of puzzled astonishment on his freckled face. Hermione stood her ground and returned his stare, look for look, until he dumbfounded her by breaking into a broad Weasley smile.

"I see what it is," he said knowingly. "My ardour has caused me to hurry into declaring myself. Please accept my apologies, Hermione; you are absolutely right to insist upon proper observance of etiquette. You are far too modest a girl to receive my addresses without the permission of your parents." Percy nodded, pleased with himself for discerning the reason for her refusal, completely oblivious to her expression of indignation. "When your father returns from abroad, I shall seek his approval before I speak with you about our marriage. I beg your pardon, Hermione. Please know that the strong passions under which I labour urged me to speak too soon."

Hermione was searching for words scathing enough to express her feelings when she spied Stormy flying about on a beginner's broom while Sirius called to her encouragingly from the ground below; Shadow and Skye were seated upon a nearby bench chatting and enjoying the lovely sunny day. Hermione seized her chance.

"Percy, thank you for escorting me to the Park; I see Skye and Shadow are here to meet me. Please excuse me, won't you? I will go to them now." With a dazzling



smile and a tiny curtsy, just for good measure, Hermione walked away from her disappointed swain, thankful for her opportune, if inadvertent, rescue.

“Good afternoon, Hermione!” Sirius called to her. As she neared him, he said more quietly, “Escaped from him, did you?”

“Yes, but not before he offered,” she said exasperatedly. “I didn’t know Stormy had already begun flying.”

Sirius shrugged. “She was interested and the kiddy broom was just sitting in the broom shed.”

Hermione observed his handsome face through narrowed eyes. “Sirius, you don’t fool me. I know very well that you bought that broom for Stormy.”

Gleaming grey eyes smiled at her. “Yes, but don’t tell Sophie, will you? She strictly forbade me to buy a broom just to teach Stormy.”

Hermione chuckled. “I can see how this marriage is going to work; Sophronia is going to tell you not to spoil the girls and you’re going to do it anyway.”

Sirius kept a watchful eye on Stormy, but his face told its own story. “Isn’t she an angel, Hermione? I’ve loved her since we were kids, not much older than you and Harry were when I met you.”

Touched, Hermione smiled and leaned her shoulder against Sirius’ upper arm. “Now, aren’t you glad I kept on

turning you down?” she said softly.

Sirius was startled into looking down at her. “I hadn’t even thought of that, Hermione! What a berk I am! I haven’t proposed to her yet...”

Hermione laughed happily. “Don’t be daft, Sirius! You and Sophronia were made for each other. I have no intention of marrying you.”

Sirius tried not to let his relief show too evidently and went back to watching Stormy as she zoomed about the area, just as treetop level, as high as the broom would go. He spoke again without looking at her. “All right, Hermione — whom *do* you intend to marry?”

“Never you mind. I have a plan.”

Sirius barked a laugh. “That is precisely what’s worrying me!” he said. “The field is becoming narrower every day, you know. I don’t believe for a second that you’re serious about Moony.”

Sirius gestured to Stormy for her to come back down to the ground, then glanced at Hermione, who looked pensive. “Hermione — who is it? I’ve wracked my brain and I cannot come up with a single candidate for you. Oh, there are plenty of blokes who would love to have a chance with you, but you don’t seem to be interested in any of them. I had thought maybe Bill Weasley —” Sirius glanced over at Skye and Shadow, who were walking in their direction,

“but I think his interests lie elsewhere.”

Hermione knelt to greet a very excited Stormy, who ran straight into her arms. “I flew! I flew as high as the trees! Did you see me?”

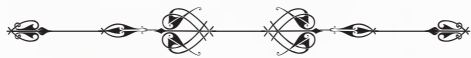
“I certainly did see you!” Hermione answered her, standing and taking her small hand. “Let’s go back to Grimmauld Place so you can tell your mama all about it over our lunch.”

Sirius stowed the broom over his left shoulder and allowed Stormy to take his right hand, smiling at the older Snape girls as they walked up.

“Did you tell Hermione, Sirius?” Shadow asked excitedly. “He’s got the tickets for the play, Hermione!” she rushed on without waiting for Sirius to answer. “And Mum is going to let me go! Will you help me dress?”

Hermione nodded. “We had best hurry back to the house; we have a good bit of Transfiguring to do today!”

The young ladies from Grimmauld Place moved with their chaperone toward the exit of the park, unaware of the figure watching them from the shadow of the trees.



The Interrogator held the glass bottle to the light, verifying that the human hair was indeed within. Nodding to himself, he withdrew a potion phial from an inner pocket;



the solution within was a lovely, clear shade of azure. A smile settled on his lips; the sight was sufficiently disturbing to cause his companions to exchange glances.

Alverard spoke. “You have the Polyjuice?”

Macnair answered. “Yes.”

“You know what the woman looks like?”

“Long silvery hair, might be worn up at a party, blue eyes, tasty figure — a real looker, but cold and unfriendly.”

Without speaking, Alverard pushed a newspaper clipping of the Delacour/Snape engagement across to Macnair. The clipping was studied, then returned. “I’ll know her when I see her.”

Alverard extended the azure blue potion to his accomplice. “Pour the lot into her drink.”

Macnair accepted the phial and stowed it carefully in an inner pocket as an even broader smile spread over the Interrogator’s face.

“She’ll sicken and will grow weaker and weaker,” Alverard said with deep satisfaction. “Every remedy they try will make her a little more ill, until she is completely wasted — and then she will die.”

Mulciber shot Alverard a glare from under his brows. “And how will that provide us with gold from Snape?” he demanded. It seemed, at times, as if Alverard was entirely focussed on tormenting Snape and not nearly focussed enough on extort-



ing Galleons from the damned double-crossing spy.

Alverard chuckled. "When we have picked off his women, one-by-one, he will do whatever we ask to spare the remaining ones."



Fleur entered the grand entrance hall at Blue Hill in the company of her mama, dropping a curtsy to her hostess before surrendering her wrap to the house-elf. She paused for a moment before the gilt mirror on the wall, ascertaining that her hair was smooth and her make-up was in order. The simple, yet elegant dress robes had drawn Severus' approval when she had worn them to the Unity Party dance in June; she tilted her head back slightly so that the Snape emeralds in her ears glinted in the light. Straightening her engagement ring, she squared her shoulders and accompanied Mère into the drawing room, which was full of people who had been Severus' friends all his life.

Moving through the crowd in her mama's wake, Fleur nodded, smiled, and when unavoidable, shook hands. Her eyes restlessly swept the crowd, seeking out her future mother- and sisters-in-law.

After nearly an hour of tedium, she was convinced that no one from Grimmauld Place or Phoenix House was present at this gathering. Her mama was happily ensconced in



the card room, playing bridge. Bored and frustrated, Fleur seated herself at a marble-topped table in a small alcove and surreptitiously removed one satin sandal to rub her toes.

Where were Sophronia and girls tonight? Was someone ill? Or had they attended a different party? Surely not. If there had been an alternate gathering, Sophronia would have owed her, she was certain of it. In a month, she would be Mrs. Severus Snape, lady of the Estuary. Sophronia would not neglect to include her in a family party! It was unthinkable.

Her thoughts were interrupted as a pleasant-faced, matronly witch entered the alcove. The woman's features seemed vaguely familiar. Hurriedly feeling for her sandal beneath the table, Fleur attempted to slip her foot back into the shoe while maintaining a social smile for the grey-haired newcomer.

"Good evening," the woman said amiably. "Isn't it a nice party?"

Fleur inclined her head politely. "Good evening, madame. It is, indeed, a nice party."

The older witch indicated a chair at the marble-topped table. "May I join you?"

"Please do," Fleur answered, searching in her mind for an excuse to leave the table. She had no desire to chat with a stranger.

"You are Severus Snape's fiancée, are you not?" the



woman said after she settled in her chair.

Fleur shot her a searching look. "I am, yes. Have we met before?"

"Oh, my dear, yes; at your engagement party. I am Elisabeth Flint. Our estate marches with the Estuary to the west."

Recognition caused Fleur to relax. "Yes, how do you do? I remember you."

Elisabeth Flint patted Fleur's hand. "You met so many of Sophronia's friends and neighbours that night; it would be no surprise if you did not remember all of us." She exchanged smiles with Fleur, then said, "Where is your young man tonight? I don't believe I have seen Snape or his step-mother."

Fleur frowned slightly. How strangely this Elisabeth Flint behaved. First she spoke of the Snapes as dear friends, then called them "Snape and his step-mother" as if she did not know them at all. With a Gallic shrug, she answered, "He is out of town on estate business. We hope to see him again on Wednesday or Thursday."

Elisabeth Flint looked oddly satisfied. "Out of town? How uncomfortable for you, my dear. I am sure you miss him exceedingly."

Fleur glanced at her engagement ring and sighed dramatically. "More than you can know, Mrs. Flint."

Elisabeth Flint smiled distractedly. "Is he getting on well

with his half-sisters, now? Sophronia was concerned about that before Severus came back home, after the war."

Fleur relaxed into the conversation. After such a boring evening, it was a relief to find someone to speak with who knew the Snapes.

"He is a prime favourite with them, I assure you. Little Stormy is beside herself, wanting him to be back on Wednesday in time to accompany her to the zoo."

Elisabeth Flint paused for a moment, in the act of moving things about in her handbag. "An outing to the zoo on Wednesday, you say? Oh, my, I am sure the littlest one would not want her brother to miss that treat."

A house-elf moved into the alcove to offer wine from a serving tray. Fleur was in the act of refusing when Elisabeth Flint took two goblets from the tray and smiled at her. "You will have a glass of wine with me, will you not, my dear?"

Sure that to refuse would be rude in a way of which Severus would not approve, Fleur graciously accepted the glass of wine. Elisabeth Flint lifted her goblet in a celebratory manner.

"To your marriage to Severus Snape," she said.

Fleur automatically raised her goblet to acknowledge the toast, suppressing the nagging thought that Mrs. Flint seemed to have an odd expression in her eyes — somehow triumphant? They drank from their glasses and replaced them upon the table.

"Do you like it?" Mrs. Flint inquired solicitously.

"Very well, thank you," Fleur replied.

"Well, it is becoming late," the older lady said. She reached for her handbag, but her hand hit the purse and it toppled onto the floor, its contents spilling out upon the fine old Axminster rug. "How clumsy of me!"

"Allow me to help you, madame," Fleur said, courteously bending to collect the cosmetics, coins and tissues which had scattered about. As she rose, it seemed as if the old lady sat back into her chair rather quickly. Fleur placed the handbag on the surface of the table.

"Come, let us drink up before I must go," Elisabeth Flint urged. She took her goblet in hand and waited for Fleur to do the same. Politely, Fleur followed suit.

"Miss Delacour!"

Fleur paused before drinking the wine and turned to see who had called her.

"Mr. Weasley!" she said, seeing Percy as he hurried toward her. He bowed briefly over her hand, then inclined his head to the older witch.

"Mrs. Flint, this is Percy Weasley."

Mrs. Flint acknowledged the introduction with a curt nod.

Percy leant close to murmur, "May I speak with you, Fleur?"

Fleur smiled at Elisabeth Flint. "Will you excuse us, please, Madame? Mr. Weasley bears a message for me."

The older witch seemed to struggle with herself, then she stood. "Please, Mr. Weasley, have my seat. I was just about to take my leave." She rose from her seat and paused by Fleur's chair to lay a hand upon her arm. "Do not fail to drink your wine, my dear. You are missing your young man too much and you are pale. Wine will put those roses back in your cheeks."

With an indulgent smile for Fleur and without a backward glance for Percy, the older witch left the alcove and was soon swallowed by the milling party guests.

Fleur watched her go with a frown between her perfectly arched eyebrows, but Percy swiftly claimed her attention. "Do you know where my brothers and sister are this evening, Fleur?"

Fleur shook her head and leaned forward. "Tell me!"

"They went to the theatre, all of them, and I was neither informed nor invited." He looked at her, resentment and hurt warring in his heart. "But why did you choose not to go?"

Fleur's lips settled into a thin, angry line. "I was also not invited," she snapped. "How did you find out where they had gone?"

"I went to Grimmauld Place to accompany them here, only to be told by the house-elf that they were all gone to the theatre." He studied her face thoughtfully for a moment before saying, "I suppose I can appreciate why I would not

be asked to join them; I am not an inhabitant of Phoenix House, nor do I yet have a connexion with one of the young ladies. But you, my dear Fleur, are all but a member of the Snape family. The affront to you is inexcusable.”

Fleur reached out impulsively and clasped Percy’s hand as it lay upon the table. “Thank you for saying that. I am afraid that I am not terribly popular with the inhabitants of that house.”

A cold, sneering voice spoke from above them. “How touching! I am sure my friend will be happy to hear that you found a way to amuse yourself whilst he is away, mademoiselle.”

Fleur dropped Percy’s hand as if she had been burnt and Percy leapt to his feet to face Lucius Malfoy.

“It was a perfectly innocent gesture, I assure you, Malfoy!” Percy said hotly.

Fleur stood with all the dignity at her command. “You will, of course, do as you think best, monsieur. I believe that my fiancé knows me well enough that he will easily be able to interpret my actions.”

Lucius eyed her disdainfully; when he spoke, his aristocratic tones dripped with malice. “No doubt.”

Percy opened his mouth to object to Malfoy’s attitude, but Lucius turned his back on the troublesome Weasley and addressed himself to Fleur.

“I have discovered that your family is dining at Clar-

idge’s after the play this evening. I would be happy to escort you there if you would care to join them.”

Fleur narrowed her eyes. “What is in it for you, Mr. Malfoy?”

Lucius gave her a thin smile. “Has Severus ever told you what a fine Slytherin you would have made? No?” He observed her icy beauty for a moment, then lowered his voice. “What is in it for me, Miss Delacour, is a valid excuse for intruding upon a private party. Will you come?”

“Certainly not,” Fleur responded. “I will not go where I am not invited.”

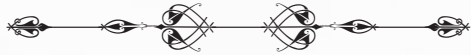
“Then I will go alone,” Malfoy said, executing an infinitesimal bow in her direction. “Good evening, mademoiselle. May I suggest that conduct your dalliances in a less public place? My friend has a lamentable temper.”

Fleur, rendered speechless by indignation, watched the refined figure move through the other party guests, his platinum hair shining in the candlelight from the many chandeliers.

Percy touched her elbow. “Shall I take you to your mama? It is a bit warm in here, and you are terribly flushed.”

Fleur nodded her acquiescence and placed her fingers upon Percy’s arm as he led her toward the card room. Behind them, conscientious house-elves descended upon the marble-topped table and Vanished the abandoned goblets of wine to the kitchen for cleaning.

From the place where she lurked behind a potted plant, “Elisabeth Flint” watched the untouched glass of wine disappear and cursed like a Death Eater.



It was a merry party that sat down to dine in the private room at Claridge’s Hotel.

The elder Snape sisters, who had been reared in the quiet of the Estuary, the Snape country estate, were delighted by the trip to The National Theatre in the wizarding limousine. The interior of the vehicle was magically expanded to hold all of them in comfort as they travelled to the South Bank. Sirius exited the vehicle first and cast a Disillusionment Charm so that the others could leave the automobile without causing a stir.

Viktor Krum had been invited to join them and was occupying Tonks with his playful flirtation. Hermione stayed close to Lupin; she found it more difficult to play-act when a certain professor was absent, but she knew Remus needed her support when he was confronted with the prospect of an evening spent watching Tonks play the coquette to Viktor.

As they settled into their seats, Hermione whispered to Lupin, “Tell me again how Sirius managed to acquire this many seats for a sold-out play?”



Remus gave her a quizzical look. “Have you ever tried to withstand Sirius when he’s determined to get something? Charm and gold go a long way in this world, Hermione.” The smile faded from his face as he watched Tonks and Krum at the other end of the row.

Hermione followed his gaze, then squeezed his arm. “Love goes farther than anything, Remus. You’ll see.”

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA held them spellbound from beginning to end. As the actors took their final bows, Hermione sat with her mouth just a bit agape. Harry leaned over to her and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Are you sure that man isn’t a wizard?” she said, indicating the actor who had played Mark Antony. “There’s something about him that’s so familiar... I think his voice is enchanted.”

Harry laughed aloud. “Look around you, Hermione. All the ladies seem to think so.”

The ride in the wizarding limousine to the hotel was a noisy one, as they all chatted about the play. The whole group was stricken to silence, however, as they entered the lobby of Claridge’s Hotel. The opulence and grandeur was breathtaking.

Once they were settled in the private dining room, their exuberance reasserted itself. Sirius sat at the head of the table, with Sophronia on his right, and entertained



himself by watching her watch the young people. Ginny and Luna displayed their engagement rings to their friends; Harry had bought an impressive sapphire for Ginny, whilst Draco had given Luna his mother's yellow diamonds. Viktor engaged the Phoenix House young men in conversation about the World Cup, which was scheduled to take place in August. Sirius had insisted upon Remus sitting at the foot of the table, as his deputy host; he had also caused Tonks to be given the seat to Lupin's left. As Krum ignored his partner to chat about sport, Lupin gently engaged Tonks in conversation.

The waiters were clearing the table for the dessert course when Alfie Merrythought, the Squib who had assisted Sirius with organising the dinner party on short notice, entered the room and nodded to Sirius.

"I'll be right back, love," Sirius said to Sophronia before stepping out into the corridor with Alfie.

"You asked me to alert you if a blond-haired wizard came in asking for you," the Squib said quietly.

"Where is he now?"

"He's seated in the lobby drinking cognac now, sir, but he was stalking about for quite a bit, trying to find out where you were."

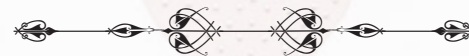
Sirius smiled nastily. "Who did he ask for?"

Alfie consulted a bit of paper. "He asked for Black,

Lupin, Snape, Potter, Weasley, Padfoot, and Moony."

"It never occurred to him to ask for the Malfoy party," Sirius chuckled, as he pressed the Muggle bills into Alfie's hand. "We will be using the back exit after all; be sure to have the driver pop round there to pick us up. Good job, Alfie."

Sirius returned to the dining room and rejoined his beautiful Sophie, taking her left hand and pressing a tender kiss to the spot where she had lately worn Sandoval Snape's wedding ring. She pulled her hand from him with a gentle reproof, but he only smiled at her and said, "Soon."



The Interrogator systematically picked up and smashed each of the ornaments on the mantelpiece in the fireplace, ranting as he did so.

"I should have made you swallow the Polyjuice with a house-elf's hair in it! Then you might have completed the job properly instead of pouring an entire dose of the poison down the kitchen drain! Do you think I have an unlimited supply of it? I do not!"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Alverard," Macnair said as he watched the infuriated Interrogator annihilate his mother's collection of china pug dogs. "The whole lot of them are going to the zoo on Wednesday. We can slip it to one of them then. You can't go to the zoo without

having a lemonade or a candy floss.”

Alverard smashed the last obnoxious pug dog and glared at Macnair, then at Mulciber. “I want both of you Polyjuiced and at the bloody zoo on Wednesday. Take extra doses with you and be prepared to stay the day, if necessary. Before night-fall on Wednesday, one of Snape’s women will be dying or one of you will be dead.”

WEDNESDAY MORNING dawned bright and clear, with no sign of the returning Potions master. Undeterred, Stormy was not happy until she had everyone out of bed and at the breakfast table. Today was the day for her trip to the zoo, and she was not to be gainsaid or repressed in any way.

Sirius, who had wandered in to share his now-habitual morning tea with Sophronia, watched the child with a slightly jaded eye. “Is she always going to treat us to these noisy raptures over the teacups?”

Sophronia hushed him. “Watch what you say,” she cautioned. “The girls might hear you.” She inclined her head toward Skye and Shadow, who

were yawning over their eggs near the other end of the table, murmuring with Hermione and Alicia about their plans for the day.

“I don’t mind if they hear me. I want them to hear me.” He raised his voice. “Girls?”

Sophronia grasped his forearm and squeezed. “Siri, stop teasing!”

Skye and Shadow turned to Sirius with smiling interest. Sirius was a prime favourite with Sophronia’s daughters; not only was he the provider of treats such as theatre trips and dinners at posh restaurants, but he made their mama smile and laugh in a way that the girls had never seen her do before. Certainly, Mum had not seemed so young and carefree when Papa was alive, had she? In fact, they had privately agreed that a casual observer would mistake Sophronia for their sister, rather than their mother, now that Sirius Black was in their lives.

Looking at his Sophie and seeing the warning in her prim mouth, Sirius relented. “I was just going to say it’s a terrific day for a trip to the zoo, don’t you think?”

The girls agreed and went back to their conversation; Sirius tossed his fringe out of his eyes and smiled wick-edly at Sophronia. “What will be my reward for being good?” he murmured.

Sophronia gave him a severe look and stood. “I am very

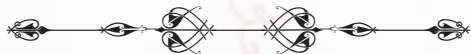
serious when I say that I will not consider my own situation until I have Skye settled," she said quietly. "I would like for you to respect my wishes in this, Sirius."

Sirius sat in his chair, looking up into Sophronia's sober bluebell eyes and realized that she was in deadly earnest. It flitted through his mind that he would do better to direct his efforts to getting Skye settled if he wanted to bear his prize off in triumph. He stood and looked down into his love's face with uncharacteristic gravity. "I will honour your wishes, Sophie. I'm happy to wait — I have until New Year's, after all."

The stern look abated somewhat as Sophronia took his hand and pressed it. "Thank you, Siri. I have to go get Stormy ready to leave, now. We'll meet you in an hour."

"I'll be here," he promised. Without vocalizing, he added, mouthing the word to her, "Always."

He was gratified to feel the small tremor of her hand before he released her to go out of the room.



The residents of Grimmauld Place and their escorts, dressed in their casual Muggle clothing, had an exciting ride on the Tube, emerging at Camden station. They walked along Parkway to Prince Albert Road, finally crossing over the Regent's Canal footbridge to the entrance of the London



Zoo. Waiting for them there they found Fleur and Percy, who had arrived separately a few moments before. Bill had been able to clear his schedule for the day and had travelled from Grimmauld Place with the ladies. Percy, seeing Bill firmly attached to Skye, and Ron attentive to Shadow, felt somewhat wronged. He was a Weasley brother — why was he not firmly ensconced at Hermione's side with the assurance his siblings displayed in *their* places with the ladies of their choice? He turned a withering glare upon Remus Lupin, who was chatting with Hermione near the iron fencing while Sirius dealt with the Muggle money at the ticket window.

Remus murmured softly, "I feel quite relieved that duelling over matters of honour has been outlawed by the Wizengamot."

Hermione twinkled up at him. "Why do you say that?"

With a gentle inclination of his head in Percy's general direction, Remus responded, "Because young Percy would very much like to cut my liver out — for the sake of your fine eyes, of course."

Hermione huffed with annoyance. "I am out of all patience with him, Remus! He offered for me, I turned him down, firmly, but he has an idiotic notion that when my parents return from holiday that he will apply to them and I will miraculously change my mind!"

Remus watched her for a moment before saying, "He's



intelligent and has a bright future with the Ministry, Hermione. Why *not* Percy?”

“He’s pompous and hopelessly self-centred, to begin with, Remus. I could never feel that way for him.”

“Who then, Hermione? We’ve been playing this game for weeks now. I enjoy your company immensely — but what are we doing?”

Hermione reached out and took his hand. “Soon, Remus. I can’t say more now, but please trust me.”

Sirius strode up to them with the tickets and began to hand them out. “Everyone feel free to go where you like within the zoo and the special section —” each of them knew he was referring to the Wizarding portion of the zoo “— but please do not wander off alone.” Sirius focussed on Stormy. “That goes doubly for you, Miss Stormy.”

Stormy bounced excitedly. “I promise I won’t!”

The young people began to hand in their tickets of admission and pass into the zoo. Sirius stuck his hand in the pockets of his trousers, then looked quickly left and right, but Sophronia had already entered with Fleur. Taking his hand from his pocket, he squatted before Stormy.

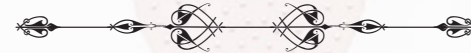
“Do you have a pocket?” he inquired in a conspiratorial whisper.

Stormy nodded and indicated the pockets on her pink hooded jacket. Solemnly, Sirius tucked the random notes

and change into her pocket. “That’s just a bit of spending money so you can buy your own lollies,” he said.

Stormy, who had seldom ever had her own pocket money to spend as she saw fit, threw her arms around Sirius’ neck and kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Sirius!” she piped before heading after the others.

Sirius rubbed gently at his cheek, an inane grin on his face. “Cupboard love,” he muttered as he handed in his ticket and followed his charges into the zoo.



The Polyjuiced Death Eaters remained in their Disillusioned state, hovering near the entrance to the zoo. Mulciber elbowed Macnair as the Order of the Phoenix party began to flow in, mingling in couples and larger groups. Mulciber watched in outrage and counted heads as the women of the group filed past him.

“How many of the bloody bitches are blond-haired and blue-eyed?” he hissed.

“Too many,” Macnair said. “The one with Malfoy’s kid isn’t a Snape; that Parkinson girl isn’t one of Snape’s, either. The two with the tall red-heads are Snape’s sisters; the older one is the stepmother — she’s walking with the fiancée. See? There’s the little one — she just ran past us. One of those, mind you.”

The two thugs spoke the spells to remove the Disillusionment Charms and headed in different directions, each dressed in the garb of zoo employees and each with one phial of deadly azure blue liquid in their pockets.



Pansy tucked her hand into Neville's arm as they wandered along the pavement. He had been so delighted when she showed up for the theatre party, and he had been very attentive to her at the Ministry dance the night before. But today, from the time the young men from Phoenix House had joined the girls at Grimmauld Place, all through their ride on the Tube, and even now, Neville seemed distracted and distant.

"Isn't this nice?" she said. "Just you and me, for once."

Neville made a noncommittal noise and kept his eyes on the pavement.

Pansy let his arm go and stepped into his path, forcing him to stop. "What's wrong?"

Neville raised his eyes from his feet to her face. She was so pretty — he never thought he would have such a good-looking girlfriend — but he just didn't understand...

"I don't know what you're doing here," he blurted.

Pansy's mouth dropped open. "I can't believe you said that!" she exclaimed indignantly. "I'm here because I



want to spend time with you, you great *idiot!*"

Neville looked into her face with great earnestness. "Then *why* won't you talk to me about us getting married?"

Pansy's hands were now resting on her hips. "For one thing, you haven't asked me if I want to marry you," she snapped. "For another thing, my parents still haven't gotten over Draco's engagement. They planned for Draco and me to marry when we were in our cribs."

"I'm tired of being your secret, Pansy," Neville said. "I want the whole world to know about us. I'm not ashamed of you and you shouldn't be ashamed of me, either."

Pansy's Slytherin cunning slipped past her adolescent annoyance into the forefront of her mind. Now matters were becoming clear to her. Dropping her hands from her hips, she stepped up to Neville, reaching one hand up to touch his cheek. "I'm not ashamed of you, Neville. You've got to trust me."

Disarmed, Neville looked helplessly down into her light blue eyes.

"If I were ashamed of you, would I kiss you in public?" she asked, suiting actions to her words and pulling his head down so that their lips met.

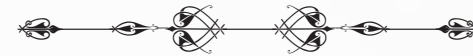
Neville did not answer in words, but returned her kiss, holding her to him tightly, at once fierce and vulnerable.



Sophronia strolled along with Fleur, engaging the younger witch in discussion of the upcoming nuptials. Her failure earlier in the week to include Fleur in their theatre trip had deeply embarrassed her. Sophronia did not consider herself to be a woman of great intelligence or wit, but she was used to believing that she was more than competent in the running of her household and her family. To become so wrapped up in her renewed feelings for Sirius Black that she neglected her duties was a point of shame for her, and she was determined to make it up to her stepson's fiancée. Fleur might not have been her choice for a wife for Severus, but it was her obligation to make things right with the woman who would soon supplant her as the doyenne of the Estuary. It did not help matters that it galled Sophronia to imagine surrendering her place in the only home she had known in the last twenty-plus years to a woman she did not like.

Shaking the traitorous thoughts from her mind, Sophronia made a response to Fleur regarding the bridesmaid dresses which had been chosen for Skye, Shadow, and Gabrielle. The wedding date was set; it was useless for her to spend time imagining what might have been. Tucking her hand in Fleur's arm she gave her daughter-in-law-to-be an encouraging smile and continued her stroll along the zoo pavement, looking for all the world as if she was

actually enjoying the conversation.



Stormy ran past the zoo entrance, looking for her best playmate. Ahead, she saw Hermione walking with Professor Lupin. She pelted up to Hermione, grabbing her hand and laughing up into her face.

"Hello," Hermione said, unable to resist smiling at the exuberant child. "What are you going to do first?"

"Is there a shop?" Stormy inquired.

Hermione laughed. "We're here to see the animals, Stormy!"

Remus Lupin nodded over to their right. "There's a shop over there, Miss Stormy," he said.

Stormy began to tug on Hermione's hand. "Come with me, please, I need your help!"

Hermione sighed and said, "I'll catch you up later, Remus. Stormy and I are apparently going shopping."

Hermione and Stormy entered the ZSL souvenir shop and Stormy immediately headed for the toys. Hermione looked about at the items, many of which bore the emblem of the Zoological Society of London; there were tee-shirts, books, sculptures, writing paper, and novelty items galore. As was usual for such gift shops, the items were rather overpriced; one assuaged one's conscience with the knowledge that it was for a worthy cause, she supposed.

Stormy had passed through the puzzles, games, and Noah's ark-type play sets and was browsing through the soft toys. There was a fabulous array of them, shelf after shelf, of elephants, giraffes, lions, tigers and monkeys. As Hermione approached her, Stormy uttered a cry of joy and thrust her hand into the shelf nearest the floor, pulling out a bubblegum-pink hippopotamus. Hermione couldn't help objecting.

"But Stormy! There are all these others that actually look like *real* animals. See, here are a grey elephant and a brown lion..."

Stormy clutched the ridiculous pink mini-hippo to her chest in a manner reminiscent of her handling of Fletcher, the Pygmy Puff. "But don't you think she's *pretty*, Hermione?"

The tragic blue eyes lifted to Hermione's face were too compelling to resist. "Of course she's pretty," Hermione replied.

Stormy plunged her hand into her pocket and pulled out a jumble of crushed notes and change. "Is this enough to buy her?"

Hermione checked the price tag and disentangled a five pound note from the jumble. "This will do it."

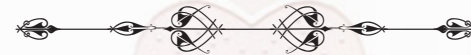
Stormy went up to the counter and purchased her pink hippopotamus from the shop lady, then tugged Hermione back out into the sunshine, triumphantly bearing her treasure.

"Now what?" Hermione asked her companion.

Stormy, who had been looking about her, spied Skye and

Bill Weasley chatting with Percy just before the entrance to the wizarding portion of the zoo. "I'm going to go show Pink to Skye!"

Stormy pranced off to join her big sister. Hermione waited until she saw Skye smile down at Stormy before she hurried away from Percy's vicinity, in search of *anyone* else with whom to see the sights.



Ron and Shadow ambled together along the pathway, arms occasionally brushing because they walked so close together. Sophronia and Fleur were behind them, followed by Hermione, who strolled between Sirius and Remus.

Ron darted a quick glance over his shoulder, then nodded toward the Giraffe House, down the path to the left. Shadow smiled at him and flitted quickly down the path, breaking into a giggle as Ron followed hard on her heels.

The others of their group, involved in conversations, did not notice their defection. Shadow burst through the door to the Giraffe House, immediately wrinkling her nose against the musky-dung smell of the animal enclosure. Ron followed her in, colliding with her just inside the doorway.

"Oi!" he grunted, reaching out to steady her.

Shadow looked around at the comical expression on Ron's face and let out a nervous laugh. As her eyes met his,

she became acutely aware of the strength of his hands as they grasped her waist. Her breath hitched in her throat as she turned to face him.

Ron cast a glance around the building then took Shadow's hand and tugged her into a corner. Swiftly, he bent his head to hers and her arms wound about his neck as he kissed her. Dear Merlin, her lips were so soft and her breath was so sweet — he was overcome with warring instincts to protect her with his life and to completely possess her with his body.

Shadow felt her arms trembling as she twined her fingers in the hair that fell over his collar. Something about being near this boy set her soul aflutter; when she was near him, all she wanted to do was kiss him — and once they began to kiss, her knees became so weak she could scarcely stand. She felt so driven to absorb him into herself — but she was not entirely sure how that might be accomplished, for they had never had time for more than a few intensely sweet stolen kisses.

So completely were they wound about and absorbed in one another that they failed to hear the opening of the door or to be aware of the entrance of Sophronia, flanked by Sirius.

"Shadow Lynn!"

Sophonria spoke sharply into the silence of the room; the lone giraffe which had been lazing in the shadows of

the interior pen started and shied out into the outdoor enclosure, away from the angry voice.

Ron released Shadow and stepped away from her with a guilty look; Shadow rounded to face her mother defiantly.

Sophonria paused for only a moment to nail Sirius with a minatory glare before advancing on her daughter.

"Please excuse us, Ron," she said without taking her eyes from Shadow's face.

Ron stepped away from Shadow and gave Sophronia a wide berth as he headed for the door; Sirius detained him with one hand, saying evenly, "May I have a word with you, please?"

Ron continued past the door to the far side of the room, where he came to a stop, turning to face Sirius, half-rebellious and half-ashamed.

"Go on and say it," he muttered to Harry's godfather.

Sirius stood before him and said sternly, "Look as if I'm talking to you, Ron."

Ron's brows contracted in a confused frown. "What —" "Nod and look sorry," Sirius continued.

The corner of Ron's mouth quirked. "Mate, what are you doing?"

"No, Ronald, look chastised — yes, that's more like it. Now, clear out and keep out of trouble. I'll talk to *her* later."

Ron nodded decisively and exited the building, with Sirius right behind him.

Sophronia regarded her belligerent daughter with a pained expression. "What do you have to say for yourself?" she asked quietly.

"Nothing!" Shadow raged, opening and closing her fists. "I didn't do anything wrong!"

"I made it clear to you that you will only be allowed to join in the activities with the older girls if your maturity warrants it."

"All I did was kiss my boyfriend! That's all, Mum! Skye kisses a new boy every day and you don't care. It's not fair!"

"We are only discussing *your* behaviour, Shadow. I am very unhappy with you." Sophronia stepped closer to her daughter, reaching out a conciliatory hand. "You're only making it worse for yourself, my love. Think of poor Ron! How is he ever going to find a wife if you both keep on pretending that you will be permitted to marry?"

Shadow backed away from her mother's hand as if she were dodging a blow. Her face, which had been red with anger, was now pale as milk.

"I *hate* you," she said to her mother. Then she rushed out the door, tears blinding her eyes as she fled along a deserted pathway.

Hermione and Remus strolled up to join Sirius and Ron, who were standing before the Giraffe House. The door thudded open and Shadow rushed by them with tears pouring down her face.

"Shay!" Ron called after her.

Sirius shook his head. "Best let her have her cry out, Ron. She won't want you to see her with her face all blotched."

Hermione looked to Ron questioningly.

"Her mum caught us snogging and was not very happy," he admitted.

Hermione nodded. "I'll go after her. We'll see you later."

Fleur, who had no desire to smell the inside of the Giraffe House, wandered away in search of some of the others. As she strolled past a refreshment booth, she stopped to buy a lemonade.

"One large lemonade, please," she said to the vendor.

"Coming right up!" the cheerful little man replied.

Fleur turned her back to him without answering and looked about her; down the rise from where she stood she saw Skye and Stormy, walking along with Bill and Percy Weasley. Turning back to hand her money to the vendor,

she took the lemonade and began to walk toward the others, sipping appreciatively from the cup in her hand. As she strolled along, she saw Stormy wander away from the adults and out of sight. With an indulgent sigh, she adjusted her path so that she would intersect with Stormy. Severus would certainly wish for her to make sure that his baby sister did not wander off.



Ginny, Luna, and Alicia spotted the Children's Zoo and agreed they would like to visit the baby animals. Harry, Draco, and Seamus watched them as they entered the enclosure and began to coo over the livestock.

"So, how was Luna's dad?" Harry asked Draco as they leaned up against the fence.

Draco's lips twitched. "He was doubtful, at first. He had Luna in the kitchen, fixing tea, and I could hear him asking her why she wanted to marry into a Death Eater family."

Seamus whistled. "He called *you* a Death Eater? Doesn't he read the DAILY PROPHECY?"

"No, he just said that my father had been one of Voldemort's chief supporters from the very beginning and that changing sides just before the end of the war is no guarantee of remorse."

"What did Luna say to that?" Harry asked.



Draco chuckled. "She said that she would not care if my father were the Dark Lord himself, but that I was good and brave and honourable and she was going to marry me whether he liked it or not."

Seamus grinned. "That's our Luna, isn't it? She wanders around pretending like she's in a fog, but when push comes to shove, she's right in there with her wand at your throat."

Harry answered seriously, "Any time I'm in a fight, I want Luna on my side, that's for sure. But what did her dad say then?"

"He told her she's his only child and her happiness means more to him than anything in the world. Too bad my old man doesn't feel that way about it."

Harry glanced at Draco's face, intrigued by the bitterness in his voice. "But you had the announcement in the paper—" Draco had uttered a triumphant whoop and passed the page around the breakfast table at Phoenix House that very morning — "so how are you managing that if your dad doesn't approve?"

"Mother left her fortune to me — the money my grandfather Black settled on her when she married my father was kept in trust for me. I don't need *his* money to support us. I just thought it would be nice to have his approval." Draco shrugged eloquently. "When is your announcement going to be in the paper?"



Harry kept his eyes on Ginny, who was kneeling in the straw and cooing over a snowy lamb. “Not yet. Ginny’s parents didn’t forbid the engagement, but they want to be sure that *we’re* sure. They’ll let us make it formal at Christmas and we’ll marry next July.”

Draco slanted a shrewd look at his old nemesis. “I see Ginny’s wearing your ring, though.”

Harry returned Draco’s look with one of his own. “Do you think I’m daft? She went out with most of the blokes in her year *and* mine while waiting for me to get my head out of my arse. Do you think I’m going to let her go back to Hogwarts *without* my ring?”

“Good thinking, mate,” Seamus said appreciatively, drawing the eyes of both his comrades to him.

“When do you think clueless here is going to catch on that Alicia fancies him?” Draco asked Harry conversationally.

Harry shook his head. “He may be a hopeless case, mate. He’ll let one of those Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff blokes steal her from under his nose and he’ll end up at the Office of Last Resort.”

Seamus punched Harry in the shoulder. “I’m standing right here, mate. I can hear you, yanno.”

“So what are you waiting for, huh? Michael Corner is moving in on you.”

Seamus snorted. “She’s older than I am, Harry. And she

played Quidditch on the House team from her second year on — how can a bloke offer for a girl who can out-fly him?”

Highly amused, Draco said, “Seamus, remarkably little of marriage takes place on broomstick, you know.”

Harry nodded his head toward Alicia, who was feeding a fuzzy yellow duckling from the palm of her hand. “She asked you to dance for the ladies’ choice the other night, mate. And you fought with her in the war. Neither of you are going to find other people to marry who share that with you. I don’t think I could have married a girl who didn’t understand what it was like on the battlefield.”

Seamus followed Harry’s line-of-sight and his face softened as he looked at Alicia. “And she’s so damn pretty. Why would she want to look at my mug for the rest of her life?”

Draco shrugged. “Girls don’t always care about looks — they’re interested in other things about men. Who knows how women think? Besides, what’s the worst thing that could happen? She could say ‘no.’ So, show her that you fancy her and see what happens.”

Alicia set the duckling on the ground with its siblings and glanced up, as if she felt their eyes upon her. Her gaze locked with Seamus’ and held for a long time. Seamus pushed away from the fence and entered through the gate, striding over to Alicia and offering his hand to help her stand.

Ginny and Luna slipped out of the enclosure and

rejoined their fiancés. Ginny wrapped her arms around Harry's waist and smiled up at him happily. "Are you responsible?" she asked, inclining her head toward Seamus and Alicia, who were laughing together over the antics of a baby goat.

"Malfoy helped, but yeah," Harry answered.

"Indeed I did," Draco said with an air of self-satisfaction. "We don't all have someone as demonstrative as a wildcat," he added to Harry with the patented Draco smirk.

Ginny flushed pink to the roots of her flaming hair, but nevertheless looked rather pleased to have garnered the nickname "Wildcat Weasley."

Harry grinned down at the girl in the circle of his arm. "Sometimes, a shove is as good as an invitation," he teased her.

"I'll shove *you*, Harry Potter!" Ginny said with mock indignation, giving him a playful push.

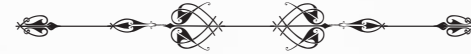
In his best primary-school-teacher's voice, Harry said, "Shoving's not nice." Then he nudged her back and ducked quickly out of her reach, sending her chasing after him, both of them laughing gleefully.

Draco pulled Luna close to his side with one arm and began to wander in the direction of the next exhibit. "Potter and I make a pretty good team," he murmured to Luna.

After giving a moment of careful consideration, Luna nodded in agreement. "I think you really do," she said



before turning her face more firmly to his chest and giving a sigh of utter contentment.



Fleur intercepted Stormy at the bottom of the hill. Stormy was holding her pink hippopotamus and sucking on a straw as she studied a camel, which seemed to also be studying Stormy as it chewed on its cud.

"Why are you by yourself, Stormy?"

Stormy jumped and turned to face Fleur. "I was thirsty..."

Fleur looked severe. "It is for your own safety that you must stay with an adult, Stormy. Come along, let's go find your sister."

Stormy, who knew very well that she ought not to have wandered off from Skye, tucked her pink hippo into the empty pocket of her jacket and willingly took Fleur's hand. They began to walk back toward the entrance to the wizarding section, near the Children's Zoo. Brandishing her cup, Stormy said, "It's Muggle fizzy drink, Fleur! How do they get the bubbles in?"

Fleur glanced about nervously. "Don't say 'Muggle' in public, Stormy. Try to remember."

Stormy's face fell. "I'm sorry. I'll try to remember."

As they neared the Children's Zoo, Skye rushed up to them, followed by Bill and Percy.



“Stormy!” Skye cried, kneeling to look in her sister’s face. “Where did you go? Don’t run away like that! You scared me!”

“I’m sorry, Skye,” Stormy said, distressed to see her normally placid sister so upset. “I won’t do it again.”

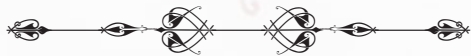
Skye gave her a little shake, then kissed her forehead and stood, extending her hand to Fleur. “Thank you for bringing her back to us, Fleur. It was very kind of you.”

Fleur accepted Skye’s hand with a genuine smile. “She will be my sister, too. Of course I will look after her.”

More in charity with one another than they had ever been in their whole acquaintance, Fleur and Skye entered the wizarding portion of the zoo with Stormy between them, followed by Bill and Percy, who had been completely ignored.

“Do you feel invisible?” Percy muttered from the side of his mouth.

“Get used to it, bro,” Bill said cheerfully, giving his brother a clap on the back.



As Hermione and Shadow strolled past the penguin exhibit, Hermione kept a close eye on her companion. Shadow’s face was still blotchy from her crying fit, but her breathing was back to normal and she no longer seemed to be shaking.



“Look, there’s a restaurant — let’s go in for some tea.”

Shadow made no demur, but followed Hermione into the small café.

“I’ve got to run to the loo,” Hermione told her. “Order coffee for me, please, and I’ll be right back.”

Shadow procured their drinks at the counter and found a table, where Hermione soon joined her. Hermione stirred sugar into her coffee while Shadow sipped at her own lemonade.

At last, Hermione said, “You know, Shadow, your mother is only worried that you’re too young to know your own mind about who you want to marry.”

Shadow looked up, desolation in her eyes. “I know. I really do understand that. But what she doesn’t understand is that *I love Ron*. I think I could convince Mum to see reason, but it wouldn’t do any good unless I could convince Severus, too.” Shadow pushed her lemonade away, and picking up a paper napkin, she began to shred it. “If it weren’t for this stupid law, Ron and I could just go out together and marry when I leave school — by that time, no one would doubt that we love one another, because we would have been showing them for two years. It just isn’t fair, Hermione. If I don’t get to marry Ron, I don’t even want to *live*. I truly could not bear to see him with another girl for his wife.”

Schooling her features not to show the alarm she felt, Hermione said, “Well, I’m sure it won’t come to that,



Shadow. We'll just have to put our heads together, and we'll come up with a plan. The important thing is to keep your spirits up and your head down — don't draw negative attention to yourself like you did today."

Shadow nodded apathetically and stared into the distance, apparently unmoved by Hermione's positive words.



As at Hyde Park, the London Zoo had a wizarding section, accessible only to magical folk; one entered through a Disillusioned archway near the Children's Zoo.

Stormy loved the wizarding zoo attractions. Her first stop was at the paddock enclosing the winged horses. The grey Granians, chestnut Aethonans and palomino Abraxans held her spellbound. Bill and Percy were drilled with questions as Fleur and Skye found a bench beneath a tree.

"The Weasleys are very good with children, aren't they?" Skye said with scarcely concealed admiration, her eyes resting on Bill.

"Yes, I suppose they are," Fleur said. "There are so many of them, after all. The older ones have always had to look out for the younger ones." She observed Severus' oldest sister for a moment, then said, "You admire Bill, yes?"

Skye's cheeks flushed. "Does it show?" she whispered.

Fleur smiled a superior smile. "I admired him once, too,



so I recognize the signs."

"But why would you —" Skye caught herself and flushed more deeply, mortified at her faux pas.

Fleur made a dismissive gesture with her fingers. "I met your brother and my mind was changed forever."

"I see," said Skye, who could not begin to understand how her taciturn brother could ever be more appealing than William Weasley. She sighed deeply.

"Why are you unhappy?" Fleur inquired delicately.

Skye looked up with a quick smile. "I'm not unhappy — I'm just a little frustrated, that's all. Severus left Bill in charge of security for us while he is away and Bill is being very... conscientious. From the way he's acting, I'm not even sure he likes me that way."

"He does." Fleur spoke with a flat finality that brought Skye's eyes to quickly search her face.

"How do you know?"

A cold little smile touched Fleur's lips. "I recognize *those* signs, too."

"If I believed that I would be very happy," Skye said softly.

"Nonsense," Fleur said. "Why do you doubt it?"

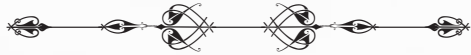
"He's being so proper!" Skye said, as if 'proper' were a bad thing. "I can't even get him to unbend enough to hold my hand!"

Fleur nodded wisely. "Men are strange creatures. He considers it to be a matter of honour, no doubt." A way-



ward look came to her face. "Would you like to have him express his interest to you?"

Skye leaned forward eagerly. "What should I do?"



Sophronia smiled indulgently as Sirius and Remus chortled over the antics of the monkeys. As much as she cared for the men they had become, it still warmed her heart to recognize in them the boys they had been. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Neville and Pansy emerging from the aviary. Slipping away from the men, she walked toward the couple, who were arm in arm and oblivious to the rest of the world.

"Perhaps you would like to freshen up," she said, removing a twig from Neville's hair.

Neville blushed, while Pansy touched her own hair and looked alarmed. "Good idea, Mrs. Snape," Neville said. "We'll do that now."

Sophronia nodded her agreement and smiled at them before heading over to the lemonade vendor. As the nice little man went to fill her cup, she heard her name. Turning, she saw Sirius approaching, smiling in that way that made her pulse race.

"I would have gotten that for you," he said, taking the drink from the cashier and handing over a note in pay-



ment. He presented the cup to her. "Your wine, m'lady."

Sophronia took the cup and chuckled. "As if I would drink wine at this time of day," she said, then took a long drink of her lemonade.



Stormy had moved on to the unicorn when Bill glanced around and saw Fleur sitting alone beneath the tree.

"Where's Skye?" he inquired as he approached his former girlfriend.

Fleur raised her eyebrows. "I believe she said she was going to the ladies' room," she responded.

"Which one?" he demanded with a frown.

Fleur tossed her head so that the curtain of silvery hair flew about her face. "I couldn't say, William. I did not inquire as to her exact intentions."

Bill turned away from her without rising to the bait, his keen eyes searching the near vicinity for Skye. "Percy," he called out, as he began to move toward the passage back into the Muggle zoo. Percy turned and Bill said, "Please escort Miss Stormy back to her mama. I am going to retrieve Skye and we will meet you later."

Fleur smiled grimly as the suitor who scorned her set off on a quest of her contrivance.



Fleur and Percy dutifully returned Stormy to the company of her mama before strolling on to see the Butterfly Paradise exhibit.

“None of the others are interested in seeing creatures that neither roar nor cavort,” Fleur commented.

Percy nodded his head sagely. “I know what you mean. The Hogwarts contingent are still only children, so you can hardly expect them to have any taste at all — except for Hermione Granger, of course,” he hastened to add, lest he be untrue to his chosen bride. “She has always had maturity beyond her years.”

“I have often noticed the adult manner in which Miss Granger behaves,” Fleur lied, happy to encourage Percy in his pursuit of the hateful Hermione.

Percy smiled down at her, gratified by the praise she gave to his intended. “And you, of course, Fleur, have exquisite taste; I have always noticed that about you.”

Fleur inclined her head gracefully. “Thank you, Percy. You are the most dignified of all your brothers,” she added spitefully, disparaging the eldest Weasley without a trace of regret.

Skye noticed the path winding along the canal and thought it might be quite cool beneath the trees, if one were to walk there. She stopped by the refreshment stand and bought a fizzy drink to enjoy as she strolled along — she was so thirsty!

Fleur was a clever witch, she had to admit. Skye had often been put-off by Fleur’s bossiness and unkindness, but ever since Severus had reprimanded Fleur in the Malfoy library, she had been like a changed person. She was even pleasant to speak with. It had been very helpful of her to suggest that Skye wander off and force Bill to come find her.

She had not long to wait, though Bill’s reaction was not quite what Fleur had led her to believe it might be.

“Miss Snape!”

She turned when she heard the clipped tones and bestowed a dazzling smile upon Bill Weasley. “Hi, Bill.

He stopped so close to her that he was fairly towering over her. “Did you or did you not hear Sirius say that no one was to wander off on their own?”

Skye looked up at him, abashed by his anger — and also strangely excited by it. “I — I heard him,” she admitted softly, unable to tear her eyes away from the sparks shooting from his blue-green eyes.

“Did you perhaps think that rule applied to everyone but you?”

The scorn in his voice was a bit more than she had bargained for. Her lower lip quivered as she lowered her eyes to her feet. "N-no," she whispered, struggling to keep the tears in her eyes from spilling down her cheeks.

"Well then, what were you doing?"

With a strangled, "Nothing!" she turned from him and stumbled along the canal-side path, wondering how such a seemingly good idea was turning out so wrong.

Two warm hands descended on her shoulders and halted her progress. "Skye?"

Now *he* sounded a bit unsure of himself. She just shook her head, mortified by the tears on her cheeks and dreading having him see her this way. Why did she never have a handkerchief when she needed one? She kept one in her robes, but she was wearing these *stupid* Muggle clothes for this *stupid* zoo trip...

Inexorably, Bill turned her until she faced him. "Skye? What's wrong?"

Keeping her eyes averted, she shook her head and wished she could drop through the ground and out of sight.

A soothing finger tilted her chin up. "Oh, love, you mustn't cry," he said, pulling a handkerchief from the front pocket of his jeans and proceeding to wipe the tears and the running mascara from her face.

Completely undone by his gentle touch and the kind-

ness of his voice, Skye continued to cry; Bill looked desperately around them and seeing no one in sight, he deftly Transfigured a large fallen branch into a wooden bench. He led her to the bench and compelled her to sit, removing the drinks cup from her grasp, then possessing himself of both her hands.

"Tell me why you're crying," he said firmly.

Skye bit her lip and shook her head. Bill watched her closely.

"All right. Then tell me why you wandered off alone."

She was so relieved he had asked a different question that she blurted, without thinking, "Fleur told me I should."

"Oh, Fleur did?"

His acidic tone claimed Skye's attention.

Bill looked at her for a moment before he raised a hand to her face; with infinite tenderness, he wiped another tear from her cheekbone. "You mustn't take Fleur's advice about *anything* without asking for a second opinion," he said.

Mesmerized by the expression in his eyes, she said, "Why?"

"She has some odd ideas about the best way to go about things," he said carefully, mindful that he could very well still end up related to Fleur. "Why did she tell you to go off on your own?"

With one of his hands holding hers, and his other hand cupping her cheek, she felt completely bound to him and

wanted nothing so much as to crawl into his lap and wrap her arms around him. Not answering him never entered what was left of her mind.

“She said if I wanted you to express your feelings for me, I should wander off so you would have to come and find me.”

When he smiled at her, she felt as if she would never be able to draw another breath, for her heart had swelled to such a size that there was no room to breathe.

“Oh, that was very bad advice. If you want me to express my feelings for you, you have only to wait until your brother returns to town. Then you will know, without any question.”

“I w-will?”

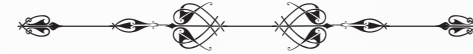
He nodded his head, setting in motion the golden fang earring dangling from the lobe of his left ear. “You will. But for now, it is my duty to protect you, not to express my feelings to you. You understand that, do you not, Miss Snape?” As he spoke his last words, the pad of his thumb brushed lovingly over her lips.

“Yes,” she breathed, moving her lips against the skin of his thumb.

“Good girl,” he murmured. For a moment they continued to sit on the bench, gazing into one another’s eyes. Then, with iron-clad self-discipline, Bill stood and motioned back toward the zoo exhibits.

“We had best go on and join the others,” he stated.

Skye stood and preceded him back along the path, whilst Bill returned the Transfigured bench to its natural state.



The vastly pleased looks on Bill and Skye’s faces when they rejoined the group did not gratify Fleur at all. Bill gave her an infinitesimal salute, and Fleur turned from him with a huff.

“Are you well, my dear?” Sophronia inquired.

“No, Sophronia, I am afraid I have the headache,” Fleur responded. “I believe I will go home, now.”

Sophronia looked about the group, her gaze falling on Percy, who was chattering to a very bored-looking Hermione.

“Percy?” she said. “Will you be so good as to escort Miss Delacour home? She has the headache.”

Percy stepped up immediately. Fleur tucked her hand in Percy’s arm and they walked away. Hermione gave Sophronia a thankful smile, which was answered with only a softening of the expression in the older woman’s eyes.

With a general accord, the group began to move toward the exit, collecting their missing members as they moved desultorily along. Everyone was tired and ready to go home.

Sirius glanced down at Stormy, who was dragging along beside him, clutching her pink hippo in one hand and a sticky

mess of candy floss of the exact same colour in her other hand.

“So how much rubbish *have* you eaten today, Miss Stormy?”

Stormy, though she was obviously very tired, managed a smile up at him. “I had loads of yummy things,” she told him. “But I don’t think I can finish the candy floss.” She uttered a perfectly defined burp, which was fortunately soft enough not to be heard by Sophronia, who was chatting with Luna and Ginny near the front of the group.

Sirius suppressed a grin and said, “A burp among friends is a grand thing, Miss Stormy, but don’t let your mama hear you, okay?”

She was extending the candy floss to Sirius, apparently expecting him to take it from her. Sirius received it gingerly and dropped it in the nearest trash bin, groping in his pocket for a handkerchief for his now-sticky fingers.

“I don’t feel good,” Stormy said, after another little burp.

“Shall I carry you?” Sirius asked her.

Stormy mutely held her arms to him and Sirius swung her up, profoundly hoping that she would not be sick on his best Muggle shirt.

Up ahead of him, Ron walked beside a non-responsive Shadow, directly behind Seamus and Alicia, who were holding hands. Sirius smiled to himself; good for Seamus! Then he looked again at Ron and Shadow and his smile

was replaced by a frown. It must be very hard on Ron and Shadow to see their housemates pairing off whilst they were forbidden to even think of one another. For all his own peccadilloes, Sirius was keenly aware of the young men in his charge at Phoenix House, and he was determined to do his best for each of them. He would speak to Sophronia about Ron and Shadow — and yes, if he had to, he would also speak to Snape.

“...the hippos...”

Sirius looked down at Stormy. “What did you say?”

“Please take me to see the hippos before we go,” Stormy said.

Sirius tapped Remus on the shoulder. “Miss Stormy wants to see the hippos. Will you pass the message up to the front of the line? I don’t want Sophronia to be worried about where we’ve gone.”

Hermione turned and walked along with Sirius. “Is she too tired to walk?”

Sirius nodded. “Had a bit too many sweets to eat, I expect.”

Hermione shook her head at him. “Let this be a lesson to you that sometimes there are legitimate reasons why Sophronia has rules for her girls.”

Sirius gave her a rueful grin. “Yes, ma’am.”

The rest of their group had turned to follow them to the hippo exhibit. Sirius took Stormy right up to the rail-

ing and read from the plaque, "PYGMY HIPPOPOTAMUS."

Stormy rested her head on Sirius' shoulder, regarding the hippo as it ambled out of its pool to lower its head and munch on straw. She looked at her soft toy hippo and then back at the real Pygmy Hippo. She giggled softly to herself, regarding the animal with dreamy eyes, thinking how funny it would be if the real animal was the same colour as her toy. After all, wasn't Fletcher a Pygmy Puff, and wasn't he as pink as her new toy? Then why could a real animal not be pink too?

As she looked at the hippo and wished, he suddenly turned pink before her eyes, just as she had hoped he would. The adults surrounding her, all fifteen of them, gasped as one and went for their wands. The simultaneous spells, cast by fifteen fully qualified wizards and witches, turned the unperturbed pygmy hippo back to his accustomed greenish-black colour immediately; the combined power of the magic also created a sound like a small sonic boom which echoed throughout the park.

Sophronia turned agonized eyes to Sirius, who handed Stormy into her mother's hands and jerked his head at Remus and Bill; they immediately began to prowl the perimeter of the area, to see if any Muggles had witnessed Stormy's burst of spontaneous magic.

"Mummy, I made the real hippo pink!" Stormy whis-

pered, awed by her own prowess.

Sophronia pressed Stormy's face against her shoulder. "Yes, love, you did, and Mummy is so proud — but we really mustn't do magic in front of Muggles if we can help it," she whispered back.

Stormy, over-excited, over-fed, and over-tired, burst into tears in response to her mother's mild reproof, and was not to be comforted. Sirius came back, assuring Sophie that the magic had been unnoticed by the Muggles, who were attributing the boom to the RAF.

"They should not be allowed to fly those jets so close to the city!" one indignant man remarked to another.

Lifting the exhausted child from her mother's arms, Sirius herded his charges out of the zoo for the dreaded ride back on the Tube.



Sophronia had seldom been so glad to see a day come to an end. Between toadeating Fleur, quarrelling with Shadow, and Stormy's first controlled display of magic, she was emotionally wrung. And all of the girls seemed unwell. Skye was utterly useless as a helper this evening; she was so distracted that Sophronia was relieved to see her go to bed early. Shadow was so lethargic and dull that Sophronia wanted to box her ears; she knew the child was

pouting over the reprimand she had received for kissing Ron, but Sophronia had no patience for such die-away airs when she was feeling out of sorts herself.

Tumbling into bed that night, she devoutly hoped that the new day would bring better behaviour from her children.



The next morning, after receiving Minerva's assurances that she would preside over the breakfast table, Sophronia indulged herself by taking her breakfast in bed. If Siri showed up for breakfast, he would just have to content himself with Minerva's company today.

After attiring herself in a becoming robe of celestial blue, Sophronia was in the act of leaving her room when Tonks met her in the hallway.

"Lucius Malfoy is here to see you. I put him in the sitting room. Would you like for me to tell him you're not receiving guests this morning?"

Sophronia smiled sweetly at Tonks. "Thank you for offering, dear, but I may as well see him."

She entered the sitting room to find Lucius standing with his back to the mantel. As at every meeting with him, Sophronia marvelled over his good looks. His hair was tied back today, and his silvery robes exactly matched his eyes. The austere beauty of his pointed face was not



lightened today by a smile; he bowed to her, rather than reaching for her hand.

"Won't you sit down?" Sophronia said.

Lucius inclined his head courteously, waited for her to seat herself, then took the chair closest to her.

"I saw Draco's engagement announcement in the paper yesterday," Sophronia said to break the silence.

Lucius sneered. "Despite my best efforts, the boy has committed himself to marry the daughter of a tabloid journalist. I must wash my hands of him, I suppose."

Somewhat taken aback, Sophronia wracked her brain for another topic of conversation. "Everyone with whom I've spoken has had nothing but praise for your ball," she said.

Lucius' lips tightened and he looked directly into her eyes. "The ball was a dismal disaster, my fair torment. Tell me the truth: are you betrothed to Sirius Black?"

Sophronia opened her lips to answer just as Winky popped into the room. "Mistress please come quick — there is something awful wrong with Miss Stormy!"

Sophronia was on her feet and running up the stairs, Lucius completely forgotten. Never had it taken her so long to reach the nursery. She burst into the room, pushing past Skye and Shadow, and found Stormy sleeping, her breathing stertorous.

"Stormy?" she said, grasping the child's shoulder, as if to rouse her.



The little shoulder rose slightly from the mattress, then fell back to the bedclothes; the motion caused her head to bob slightly on the pillow, but she did not stir.

“Stormy!” Sophronia’s voice rose as she seated herself on the cot and took the child’s hand in hers; immediately the other hand flew to Stormy’s forehead.

“She’s burning up! Winky, have you tried a fever-reduction spell?”

Winky wrung her hands. “Yes, Mistress, Winky tried. Winky has never seen a sickness like this.”

Sophronia felt panic rising in her breast, into her throat, constricting her voice. Skye put her hands on her mother’s shoulders, while Shadow knelt at Sophronia’s feet, her eyes glued to her baby sister’s face.

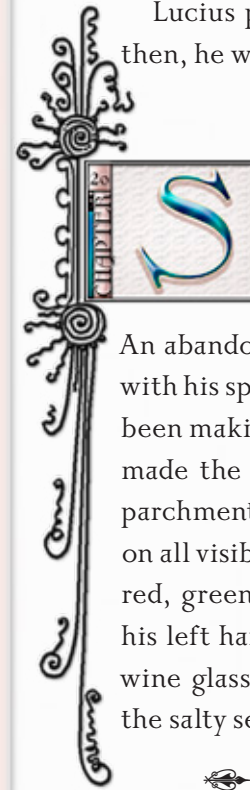
Unapologetically, Lucius Malfoy stepped into the room and directly up to Sophronia, who glanced at him with uncomprehending eyes before her gaze went back to her unresponsive child.

“Command me,” he said to her, bending so that his face was on the same level as hers. “Tell me how I can be of service to you.”

Sophronia convulsively gripped Stormy’s hand and methodically reached behind her to press Skye’s hand as it lay upon her shoulder, then moved to stroke Shadow’s hair. “Find Severus. Bring Severus home.”

“I will go now.”

Lucius paused only to make a small, stiff bow; then, he was gone.



SNAPE SAT at the small wooden table before the open window, his right elbow planted on the table and his right cheek resting in the palm of his right hand.

An abandoned quill lay atop a parchment covered with his spiky handwriting; it appeared that he had been making a list, but the many crossed-out lines made the writing hard to decipher. Next to the parchment lay an odd cube-shaped object, covered on all visible surfaces with small squares of colour: red, green, blue, white, yellow and orange. With his left hand, Snape idly fingered the stem of the wine glass on the table before him as he inhaled the salty sea air and brooded.



His sojourn in Paris had been productive, but not satisfying in the least. The investigative wizarding firm had been persuaded to open their files to his scrutiny, after which he had made two calls of his own. The regis-

trar of the university in Lyons had been happy to provide monsieur with the dates of Val Delacour's attendance, once he had seen the colour of the gentleman's money. The dean of students, however, required a bit more urging to part with his information.

It had been as Snape had suspected. François Delacour had paid a large sum of gold to have his son's record at the university expunged. He could scarcely blame the investigators for not discovering that fact; he had not asked them to look for a cover-up, so there was no reason for them to suspect one.

His next visit had been made to the Delacour estate, outside of Paris. Boldly walking up to the door, he pulled the bell and introduced himself to the non-English-speaking house-elf as Mademoiselle Fleur's fiancé. The small elf bowed him into the sitting room and promptly went to call her master to attend the visitor.

Snape's father-in-law-to-be shook his hand with cautious reserve.

"To what do we owe the honour of your visit?" François inquired delicately, after inviting Snape to sit and seating himself in a Louis XIV armchair.

Severus crossed one booted leg over the other and regarded the older wizard. "I have been to the last school from which Val was expelled for attempted rape. You bought the silence of the university. I would like for you to tell me now what else about your family you have concealed from me."

Monsieur Delacour had the grace to look shocked. "Nothing, Severus! Why would I do such a thing?"



A pronounced sneer settled on Snape's face. "Are you familiar with the Muggle proverb? 'Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.'" Snape rose to his feet and towered over Delacour. "I do not appreciate being made to appear foolish, monsieur."

François cowered in his chair. "It was a private family matter! It has nothing to do with Fleur's suitability as an eligible wife for you!"

"To introduce a known rapist into my home without informing me of it is a private family matter?" Snape's volume was decreasing, but he was so angry that he fairly spat the last three words. "Your sense of propriety is a complete mystery to me, monsieur. Kindly let me be the judge of what is pertinent." He bent and placed his hands on the armrests of the chair, his face inches from that of François, who immediately moved to cross his arms protectively across his chest and to press himself more firmly into the cushion at his back. "Tell me what else you have kept hidden from me."

"Mon Dieu, monsieur! Nothing!"

Snape stared with disgust at the sweat-drenched wizard before him for a long moment before he turned and strode to the doorway. Turning to look back at Delacour, who was mopping his face with a silken handkerchief and a shaking hand, Snape's very demeanour emanated menace.

"If I find you have lied to me, you will be sorry in the extreme."

The stout man pushed himself, shaking, to his feet. "I am already sorry in the extreme! Sorry we ever met you!"

Snape was in front of the man again in three long strides. "It is



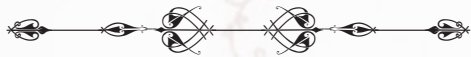
within your power to remedy that situation," he said.

"Don't think I haven't tried," Delacour sputtered. "Fleur will not listen to reason. She and her mother will have you, regardless of what is said to them." His small eyes narrowed. "Is it your wish to terminate the contract?"

Snape's lips were pressed into a thin line, as if to prevent himself from uttering the words he wished to speak. His nostrils flared, but he did not reply.

The sitting room door opened and Snape whirled to face it, his left hand reaching for his wand. Val Delacour, seeing the identity of the mysterious visitor closeted with his father, ran as if for his life and disappeared into the nether regions of the house.

Snape returned his wand to its customary place up his right sleeve and tugged on the cuffs at his wrists before once again walking to the doorway. "I will bid you adieu, monsieur," he said, and executed a brief bow before exiting the room and letting himself out of the house.



Snape roused himself from his brooding and pulled the parchment toward him again. It was imperative for him to put his own convoluted affairs aside so that he could fulfil the duties of the position in which Dumbledore had left him.

One of his duties was to see the Order of the Phoenix young ladies settled in marriage contracts. It appeared to him that



Miss Lovegood and Draco would make a match of it; he had also been quite pleased to note that Potter seemed to have given up his pretensions regarding Skye and begun to pursue Ginevra Weasley. The way Miss Weasley had responded to Potter's attentions had answered his earlier question regarding her wistful behaviour — the silly chit had been mooning over Harry-ruddy-Potter. There was certainly no accounting for taste. The Spinnett girl seemed to have sought out Mr. Finnigan; it might be necessary to give Finnigan a nudge to move him in the proper direction.

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose against the threatening headache. That left only Hermione Granger and Nymphadora Tonks to be settled and he could scarcely bear to think of either of them. A kaleidoscope of images assaulted his mind, and though he clenched his eyes closed and turned his head away, Miss Granger's face paraded through his consciousness: eleven-year-old hand-waving know-it-all; Petrified casualty of the Basilisk, in need of the potion he brewed for its victims; joining her wand with Potter's and Weasley's to disarm him in the Shrieking Shack; running from his presence with her hand clamped over her quickly elongating front teeth; leading Dolores Umbridge to her unfortunate meeting with the herd of angry centaurs; timidly approaching him regarding her seventh-year Independent Study project;



sleeping in his arms, the curves of her body pressed to him in an intimacy which decent teachers did not share with their students; in his arms again in a flame-coloured gown, mesmerising him, enticing him —

“No!”

Frustrated, he picked up the cube with the multi-coloured squares on it. He had found it in a Muggle shop along the promenade, near the shore. According to the packaging, one could twist entire sections of the cube in various directions, mixing up the coloured blocks; the objective then became to rearrange the blocks so that only those of the same colour were on each side of the cube. Experimentally, he twisted the top row of red squares to one side. Now that row was occupied by the wrong colour on each surface of the cube. The mathematical nature of the problem appealed to his scientific curiosity; he was certain that accomplishing the task of sorting it out could not possibly be as difficult as the advert implied. He also thought it would be an intriguing puzzle for Stormy, who apparently adored Muggle toys. After all, her favourite game was the one Hermione had purchased for her and taught her to play —

“No!”

With a near-physical effort, he pushed Hermione Granger out of his mind and determinedly concentrated on

Nymphadora Tonks — clumsy, good-natured Nymphadora. She was not attractive, not in his eyes, but she had admirers. He did not understand why she had entertained the notion of Lupin’s offer if she were not planning to accept it, but the thought processes of women — particularly of *young* women — were a complete mystery to him. If Nymphadora had not toyed with Lupin’s affections, he might not have rebounded into Hermione’s arms.

“No!”

He wrenched his thoughts back to Tonks. Now, Nymphadora had Krum interested in her, but Krum was not a citizen of their country and was not required to comply with the marriage law. Additionally, Krum was bloody well supposed to marry Hermione. Had he not kissed her in the stands at the Alumni Quidditch Match? In the social climate fostered by the marriage law, a man did not go about kissing females he had no intention of marrying. Did Krum not realise that his actions towards Hermione were dishonourable? Had not Snape himself made important decisions based on those actions?

“Dammit!”

With several random, vicious twists of the cube, he disarranged colours in every direction. Now, he would put it right. Working over a puzzle of logic was an excellent way to bring one’s thoughts under control; he had known this

since his miserable youth at Hogwarts.

As his long fingers worked over the multi-coloured object, he realised he had been attempting to gain control of his thoughts for days, to no avail. Never in his thirty-eight years on the planet had he possessed less command over his wandering mind than he did now. He was determined not to return to Grimmauld Place until he harnessed complete power over his wayward wits.

Thirty minutes later, the completely disordered cube lay abandoned on top of the similarly forsaken parchment. He could no more set the cube right than he could set his life right — how in the hell was he supposed to sort out Nymphadora Tonks and Hermione Granger into the bargain?

A brisk knock at the door of his room brought him instantly on the alert. Rising stealthily, he drew his wand and silently cast the spell to cause the door and the wall surrounding it to become transparent. With an impatient jerk of the door, he said, "Get in." When Lucius Malfoy passed him into the room, he carefully looked up and down the inn corridor before closing and warding the door again.

"I see I'm late," Lucius said, eyeing the empty wine bottle as he shrugged out of his heavy travelling cloak and tossed it on the bed, all the while narrowly surveying his old friend. "You're bloody hard to find," Lucius added as he and Snape seated themselves across from one another

at the wooden table.

"I bloody well *meant* to be hard to find," Snape retorted acidly.

Lucius glared at him coldly. "I'm sure you had your reasons."

Snape summoned a bottle of brandy and clean goblets from the sideboard and poured a measure for each of them.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Lucius leant forward. "Stormy came over ill on Thursday morning, Severus. Sophronia asked me to fetch you home."

Snape paused in the act of raising the goblet to his lips; his black eyes closed and a spasm of emotion crossed his face and was quickly gone.

"It's Saturday," he commented evenly.

"I bloody well know what day it is, Severus. I've been combing the damnable Continent for you for two days, after spending one day looking all over England for you." Lucius looked about the slightly seedy hotel room with disdain, noting the corpses of dead flies littering the floor, a sure sign of Snape's boredom. "What in blazes are you doing in a dump in Boulogne-sur-Mer?"

Snape waved an impatient hand. "Tell me about Stormy," he commanded.

Lucius shook his head. "The Healers at St. Mungo's could not identify the illness; Sophronia has taken her home to the Estuary. She's asking for you."

Snape's head snapped up and he stared hard at Lucius. "Stormy is asking for me?"

Lucius made a gesture, as if to touch Snape on the arm, then quickly covered by picking up the goblet and swallowing brandy.

"Not Stormy. She had not regained consciousness when last I received word. It is Sophronia who is asking for you."

Snape rose and began to pack his belongings in his small travelling case, wielding his wand as if he wished to do the blameless articles of clothing deadly harm.

"Severus, there is something else you must know."

Snape looked up at the tone in Malfoy's voice. "What?"

Lucius rose and began to pace. "The night before you arrived to spend last weekend at the Manor, three Death Eaters accosted me in the garden."

Snape became completely still as he stared at Lucius.

"It was Alverard, Severus. He has Mulciber and Macnair with him."

Snape's throat was suddenly so dry that his words came out as a croak. "What did they want?"

Lucius stopped and looked squarely into Snape's face. "They wanted information about your whereabouts and your movements."

In two strides, Snape crossed to Malfoy, stopping just beyond reach. "Why have you not told me this before?"



Malfoy stood his ground. "You should have been told, immediately. The only thing on my mind was Sophronia and that blasted ball." For an instant the mask slipped. "I meant to offer — then Sirius-bloody-Black showed up and ruined everything." Lucius looked away, only the muscle of his clenched jaw betraying his distress. "Alverard was the last thing on my mind. When I thought of it again, you were gone. I had no idea you were leaving the country for an extended *holiday*." He stepped away from Snape and began to pace again.

Snape gripped the back of the chair he had previously occupied. "What did you tell them?"

"I pled ignorance and gave them gold."

"Did they inquire after... anyone else?"

Lucius frowned. "Why would they? It all came out in the trials after the war, Severus. They know you were the one who stole Miss Granger from them." He began to tick them off on his fingers. "Mulciber was humiliated that she was taken from the safe house under his command. The Dark Lord tortured Cliffe to death in front of all the Death Eaters as an object lesson, and Cliffe was Macnair's cousin. Even Alverard lost face with Voldemort for not recapturing the prisoner once he arrived on the scene." He shook his head and his near-white hair moved about his pointed face. Snape, to whom none of this was news,



turned away and resumed his frantic packing.

Malfoy spoke again. "It's you they want. Alverard is fixated on you and the other two are allowing him to do their thinking for them. It's entirely your fault, as far as they are concerned. *You* are the cause of all their troubles."

Snape glanced at Lucius, his black eyes inscrutable. "They have not yet *begun* to see trouble," he murmured before slamming the lid closed on his travelling case.



Hermione trimmed the wick of the oil lamp and dimmed the light in the room where Stormy lay, slack and unresponsive. She had combed out the matted corn silk hair and gently pulled it into a short plait down the child's back. A bowl of magically-cooled water, scented with lavender, was situated upon the marble-topped bedside table in the best guest room of the Estuary, the Snape country estate. Hermione had taken a fine handkerchief of ivory lawn and dampened it before bathing the fevered face of the unconscious little girl. Now she moved her chair close to the window and alternated gazing out the window at the moonlit garden and watching Stormy sleep.



Sophronia's first action that Thursday morning had



been to Floo the Healer in the village near the Estuary. Healer Fairywinkle had attended each of Sophronia's children from birth and knew their constitutions and medical histories. He had gladly stepped through the Floo and followed Sophronia to the nursery at Grimmauld Place.

"It is most likely a bug, Madam Snape," he said soothingly as he first stood over Stormy, taking her pulse. He pulled out his wand and cast a number of diagnostic spells; it seemed to Sophronia as if he repeated some of the spells more than once, and that each repetition simply confused him more. At last, he sheathed his wand and turned to Sophronia with a grave look. "I think, to be on the safe side, we ought to have her checked over by the Healers at St. Mungo's, Madam Snape. I'm sure it is nothing to worry about, but we must be careful to cover every possibility."

Next had passed a very hectic twenty-four hours at St. Mungo's, with the Healers on one side, attempting to send Sophronia home to rest while they ran diagnostic spells on Stormy, and Sophronia on the other, steadfastly refusing the imploring of her daughters, Sirius, and Minerva McGonagall. She was not about to permit Stormy to wake up in a strange and frightening place without her mama.

At the end of the period of observation, a team of Healers had come to speak with Sophronia, who was supported on one side by Sirius and on the other by Skye and Shadow.



“Madam Snape, we feel that it would be best to confine her to the Contagion Ward. We cannot be certain that her condition is not infectious and it is imperative that we take every precaution. We have not yet identified what the illness may be, but we do have some experimental potions we can try to bring Miss Stormy out of her coma.”

Sophronia instinctively reached out to her daughters at this last, frightening word, and the three women huddled together as Sirius sat helplessly by, utterly confounded in the face of this situation. After a moment, he said, “What kinds of experimental potions?”

When Sirius asked his question, Sophronia seemed to rally for a moment. “No! No ‘experimental’ potions! Her brother is a Potions master — he will be the one to say if she is to receive anything experimental.”

The Healers stirred nervously. “Miss Stormy is related to *Professor Snape*?” the youngest of them inquired.

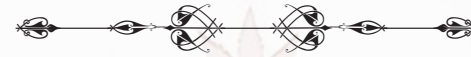
Sirius bristled. “How many Snapes do *you* know, Healer Howser?” he demanded. “You people have had Stormy here for a full day — can’t you tell us *anything* worth hearing?”

The eldest of the Healers stepped forward and addressed Sophronia. “Madam Snape, your daughter is gravely ill. She may be contagious, and of danger to yourself and your other children. She is going to require round-the-clock care, which we can provide her with at St. Mungo’s. Leave



her with us and we will care for her.”

In less than an hour, Sirius had obeyed Sophronia’s command to move the ailing child to the Estuary, where she meant to tend her daughter with her own hands, aided by her daughters and her house-elves.




Hermione had not asked permission or informed anyone of her intentions, save for Minerva McGonagall.

“Sophronia can’t sit with Stormy day and night; she will have to rest sometime, Professor. I can be useful to her. I couldn’t bear to stay here and attend parties knowing that Stormy is so ill.”

Minerva, distressed that she was unable to assist Sophronia in any more material way, was thankful to give her permission for Hermione to go to the Snapes’ to help take care of Stormy. Minerva could very well manage the remaining girls under her care without additional assistance. Pressing the soft pink hippopotamus into Hermione’s hands, she waved as her former student Disapparated to the Estuary.

Hermione quietly shook her head when Skye said that she should stay in London and continue with her social engagements. “Don’t be daft,” she said, and held Skye in her arms when the other girl dissolved into tears upon her shoulder.







Healer Fairywinkle had been in to see Stormy settled; it was decided to put her in one of the spare bedrooms rather than in the nursery, to provide the patient with a larger bed and her attendants with more room to manoeuvre. Nanny, the ancient house-elf who had attended the nursery since before Severus was born, received her instructions from the Healer with near-reverent attention. Later that night, after watching for hours as Stormy lay without moving, Nanny had confided to her mistress that she was sure the illness was the Black Water Influenza.


Sophronia's reaction had caused Healer Fairywinkle to be summoned from his bed to attend to Madam Snape.

When Skye was five years old, and Shadow was two, Sophronia had given birth to a son. Simon Snape had been a bouncing baby, with his father's coal-black hair and unfortunate nose. Just before his first birthday, baby Simon was stricken with the Black Water Flu. Not all of the skill at St. Mungo's had been of any use. He was sent back home to the unceasing care of his mama and his nurse, for there was nothing the Healers could do to halt the progress of the disease ravaging his little body. Simon Sandoval Snape was buried in the family plot on his first birthday. It was five years before Mr. Snape could

convince his quietly grieving wife to bear another of his children — and Stormy was born.

Hearing old Nanny state that she was sure Stormy was suffering from the same illness that had claimed her baby boy sent Sophronia into an abyss of despair from which she could not be calmed. It was not until Healer Fairywinkle tipped a combination Calming Draught and Dreamless Sleep potion down her throat that Sophronia quieted and finally fell into unconsciousness.



When Severus arrived at the Estuary on Sunday afternoon, he had already availed himself of visits to Professor McGonagall and the Healers at St. Mungo's. He entered his family home to find his step-mother recovering from an excess of nerves, his sisters upon their beds for quick naps, and Miss Granger in command of the sick room.

He went first to speak with Sophronia, and her sincere anguish alleviated his impatience with her tears. He had only seen his half-brother once, having received a cursory summons to appear at the child's naming ceremony; he had therefore felt no particular emotion when required to attend the placing of that minute white casket in the unforgiving earth. His developing affection for his half-sisters provided him now with a frame of reference for that loss. He devoted

himself to the task of allaying Sophronia's fears with more patience than anyone would have credited him. Would not the Healers have said so if Stormy had the Black Water Flu? It was undoubtedly some other ailment; Sophronia should remain calm and rest to regain her strength for later, when Stormy would be awake, and would need her mama.

When he could escape, he did, and went to find Skye. She had just gotten up from her nap and was coming out of her room when she saw him on the landing. Her wan, tired face lit up at the sight of him, and she ran into his arms, which, for once, dutifully opened to receive her.

"Severus!" she exclaimed in a hushed voice, "Thank goodness you've come!"

"You look tired, Skye."

"I hardly do anything, really. I just sit with Mum so she will not fret so much."

"How is Stormy?"

"Unchanged. She has not been awake since Wednesday night."

"May I see her?"

"You're not afraid of infection?"

Snape's snort was answer enough.

"No, of course you're not. Come along — but don't be shocked, Severus. She is in a coma."

He was both shocked and disturbed to see his ebullient

baby sister laying so still and white upon the bed with the covers pulled up to her shoulders. She wore the fluffy pink pyjamas with the blue and yellow bunnies; tucked in beside her was a soft pink hippopotamus toy. Already, in the week since he had last seen her, she had lost so much weight that her face had sunken to a skeletal appearance. Stepping up to the bed, he drew his wand and cast a number of spells, which caused different parts of the small body to glow beneath the sheet.

"The Healer did that, Master Severus," Nanny informed him in her squeaky voice.

"I know he did, Nanny," Snape answered his old nurse. "Nevertheless, I must see for myself."

He and Skye exited the room and went across the hall, into Skye's room, to speak.

"Nanny is not competent to have charge of the sick-room," he said. "She is simply too old."

"It is Hermione who is in command," Skye assured him. "Healer Fairywinkle says no one could manage better, for Hermione can be trusted to follow his directions implicitly."

Snape knew precisely how well the young witch could follow directions, when she was so inclined. "We are very much obliged to Miss Granger," he said, "but she did not come to us to act as a sick nurse."

Skye was silent for a moment before saying, "No, she did

not—but you haven't *been* here, Severus. You don't know. She is so much like a part of our family that we just don't think about whether or not we should let her do these things."

Casting about in his mind for an acceptable solution to the continuing problem of the presence of Hermione Granger he said, "We would not ask her to attend the sickroom, but surely Miss Delacour could spend time with Sophronia and free your time for Stormy." Perceiving a change in Skye's expression, he said, "I know Miss Granger has encouraged you to despise my affianced wife, Skye, but surely you can see how she could be—and would wish to be!—of service to us now."

Skye turned from him, saying only, "I am sure it is just as you say, Severus. See if she will come to this house."

With a muttered imprecation, Snape did just that, Apparating to London and walking to the Delacour dwelling.

He was ushered into the sitting room, where Fleur greeted him with a fine balance of tenderness and reserve. He soon found that though Fleur sympathised with his family in their affliction, she had no intention of exposing her person to the dangers of infection. She told him that her mother had forbidden her to enter the house until all danger of contagion was past. When Madam Delacour joined them in the sitting room, and found that Snape had had the imprudence to visit Stormy in her sickroom,

she became visibly alarmed.

"Severus, it is not wise," Fleur said, pressing his hand fondly. "There can be no need for you to take such a risk—gentlemen have no place in a sickroom."

Snape removed his hand from Fleur's grasp and stood, disgust evident in every line of his rigidly held body.

"Are you afraid that I may become a carrier of the disease and infect you?" he demanded dangerously. "I beg your pardon. I should not have come here. I will not do so again until Stormy is well."

Hélène Delacour spoke up. "Excellent thinking, my dear Severus!"

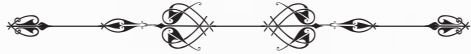
Fleur sprang to her feet, placing imploring hands on Snape's chest, having forgotten the disastrous results of her last attempt to touch him. "You will *always* be welcome here, my love. Please, come to see me whenever you can. I have missed you terribly!"

She stood on tip-toe as if to kiss him, her beautiful face tilted invitingly for his caress, but he put her from him with ungentle hands.

"Good day, madam," he snarled, executing the most perfunctory of bows before stalking from the room without a backward glance.

Snape's anger was pushed brutally aside. He had no further time to waste on such trivialities. As his vague suspi-

cions began to coalesce, he realised it was time for him to gather more important information.



The Healers at St. Mungo's had explained all of the diagnostic spells they conducted on Stormy and what they revealed. There was no known illness that corresponded with Stormy's sudden onset and her coma.

"Did you attempt any general Healing?" he inquired.

Healer Howser looked up uneasily from the chart to which he was referring for information. Professor Snape had dogged his life through seven years at Hogwarts and still had the ability to make the fully qualified Healer feel as if he were a cauldron-melting schoolboy.

"We attempted *Rennervate*, and administered an Invigorating Draught," Healer Howser admitted after looking through the notes.

"What were the results?" Snape snapped impatiently.

"If anything, each attempt caused a drop in her heart and respiration rates."

Healer Howser stood anxiously as the bane of his school years stared over his head at a spot on the wall, then turned and was gone with a swirl of the ever-present black robes.



Snape Apparated back to the Estuary and descended to his basement laboratory. He had not been in residence much thus far, so this laboratory was sparse as to the amenities he planned to install, but the basics were in place.

Methodically, he set out the ingredients to brew a simple Calming Draught for Sophronia, occupying his hands as his mind mulled over the information at his disposal.

Years of living a double existence undoubtedly had the tendency to give one certain paranoid inclinations. He was the first to admit — though only to himself — that his mind usually leapt to the least flattering, most unpleasant explanation for any set of facts. However, it did not take an Arithmantic genius to arrive at the possibility that Stormy might have been poisoned.

The examination conducted at St. Mungo's had been perfectly adequate; his own revealing spells, cast to look for traces of Dark Magic, had revealed nothing new. The puzzling feature of what he had learned thus far was that the Healers' attempts to improve Stormy's condition had caused a degradation of her status. Generally, an unsuccessful treatment would leave the patient unchanged, rather than causing the condition to worsen.

When he had decanted the Calming Draught into several doses, he sealed each phial and arranged them in his cupboard, which he then locked and warded before



climbing back up to continue his investigation amongst the occupants of the house.

Over the next few hours, everyone who had been in Stormy's company at the zoo was closely and repeatedly questioned by the unsmiling Potions master.

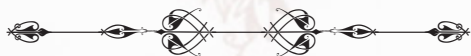
"No, she was fine that morning. She ate her breakfast and was bouncing around and annoying everyone."

"I walked with her in the wizarding zoo. She was happy and full of questions. She did not feel poorly, not then."

"I don't know how many sweets and treats she had that day. As far as I can tell she sampled everything they had."

"It wasn't until the end of the day that she asked to be carried, but you know how children exhaust themselves with excitement."

"She didn't eat her supper and she was quiet in her bath, but she was still talking to us when we put her to bed."



It was getting late by the time he entered Stormy's room again. She lay in the exact same attitude he had left her in hours before. An oil lamp, wick trimmed low, burned on a table near the window; in the chair by the lamp sat Hermione Granger, a book open upon her knees. When she saw him come in, she closed the book and rose to meet him at the foot of Stormy's bed.



Twining her fingers and clasping her hands before her, Hermione was able to control her trembling. Though she knew from his sisters that he had returned, this was her first glimpse of Professor Snape since she had left him with a Veela draped over him in the kitchen at Malfoy Manor over a week before. Her keen eyes noted the pronounced, vertical lines about his mouth and the deep crease between his eyebrows; the stubbly shadow on his jaw and the way his oily hair hung about his face told the tale of how long it had been since he had last attended to his own toilette. Eschewing an effusive greeting, she spoke to him as if they had parted only moments before.

"Hello, Professor."

Snape's impassive eyes travelled from her face to her feet and back again. "Miss Granger," he said with a slight inclination of his head. "Any change?"

Hermione shook her head. "None."

Snape stepped past her, approaching the side of the bed; as he did so, the sleeve of his robe brushed against her clothing and her strawberry-almond scent swept over him.

"Miss Granger!" he growled, momentarily losing his focus.

Hermione jumped, still so close to him that her movement caused her to collide with him at Stormy's bedside. "Sir?" she said, startled and a bit confused.

His arm shot out and his hand closed about her upper



arm; he glared down his ugly nose at her, his gaze settling on her parted lips, through which she was breathing in little panting gasps. The seconds ticked by, and neither of them moved to step apart. Hermione forced herself to swallow and her lower lip was tugged between her teeth; Snape's glittering black eyes followed the path between her teeth and he watched with unnatural intensity as she gave in to one of her most annoying habits and began to chew nervously on her lower lip.

Releasing his hold on her arm as if she were suddenly too hot to touch, Snape deliberately turned his back to her and seated himself at Stormy's side. "I am going to attempt Legilimency — please leave us."

"Sir — may I not observe?"

Snape closed his eyes, struggling to put the confusion brought about by her proximity out of his mind; he had to concentrate.

"If you seat yourself over there and do not make a sound, you may observe," he said.

Hermione did not answer, but moved back to her chair and sat down, glad of the chance to take her weight from her traitorously trembling legs.

Snape turned the bedclothes neatly down until they rested at Stormy's waist. Legilimency was best performed when one had direct eye contact with one's subject; as this

was not possible, he knew that physical contact would be imperative. He took her right hand and held it clasped in his right hand, and he spoke aloud to her: "I'm going to come inside your mind, Stormy. There is nothing to fear."

With his wand in his left hand, he cast the spell without speaking the incantation, then lay his wand upon the duvet and placed his left hand over her forehead.

In her fevered state, Stormy's thoughts were in turmoil as Severus gently entered her mind. Uppermost was her distress — she had done magic in front of the Muggles and Mummy was cross! He saw in quick succession the pink pygmy hippopotamus and the horror on the faces of the adults as they returned it to its natural state. Next he saw Stormy handing money to a vendor and accepting a cup of fizzy lemonade; he felt her pleasure as she sucked on the drinking straw, then the dampening of her spirits from the slight reprimand from Fleur. He would have to remember to thank his fiancée for her care of his sister.

He stayed with her for some time, wanting to be sure that he had seen all there was to see of her zoo outing. The little imp had a pocket full of spending money and she spent it at every opportunity on a world of rubbish. He was amazed that a person as small as Stormy could ingest so many sweets without becoming violently ill, poison or no poison.

After the third re-play of the pinking of the pygmy hip-

popotamus, Snape ended the Legilimency spell, retaining his position by her side, with his hand on her fever-scorched face. There had been ample opportunity for her to have been poisoned; he was certain that her gradual flagging of energy and of spirits as the day drew to a close was the result of villainy, rather than natural illness. Now the puzzle was to determine what the poison had been. He had to be entirely sure of the poison before he attempted to provide an antidote. Dosing her with the incorrect antidote would be nearly as bad as giving her an additional shot of the poison that had made her ill in the beginning.

Think, Severus! he chided himself. He had a rather keen notion of what the poison was, but he had to be absolutely certain. Samples of body fluids would be of no use to him after this period of time; the toxin would already have metabolised. If only he had been here when she took ill! He could have collected specimens from her then and deduced the poison before it had time to begin causing damage to her internal organs.

Sod that — if I had been here I would have accompanied her to the zoo and no one would have dared harm her!

With an audible groan, Snape removed his hand from Stormy's face, inadvertently dislodging the soft pink hippopotamus and sending it tumbling to the floor. He bent to reach for it, but Hermione was there before him,

dropping to her knees and retrieving the soft toy, then extending it to him.

Wordlessly, Snape reached for the toy, his fingers brushing hers as the hippo went from her possession to his. Riveted, Snape stared at his long fingers, which were tingling from the contact with her soft, warm hand. As he stared, he became distracted by an anomaly on the preposterous pink fur of the plush toy.

"*Lumos,*" he murmured, not bothering to pick up his wand to light the branch of candles on the bedside table. Instantly, the candles sprang to life and Snape stared hard at the toy in his hand. That looked like... well, it looked like someone had been sick on the pink hippo.

"Miss Granger — did Stormy vomit Wednesday night?"

"Yes, Professor. She had so many sweets and other rubbish that we weren't surprised when she threw up all over her bed. Why?"

"Was this toy in the bed with her?"

Hermione saw the gleam of exhilaration in his eyes. "Yes, she wouldn't even put it down when Professor McGonagall bathed her that night."

Snape was up and moving before Hermione regained her feet.

"You think she was poisoned, don't you?"

Snape stopped half-way to the door and gave her an

appraising look.

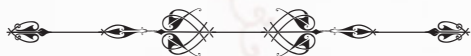
“Well done, Miss Granger. And what am I going to do now?”

Hermione approached him, her face glowing with excitement. “You’re going to analyse the vomitus from the toy and isolate the components of the poison — then you’re going to brew the antidote.”

The quirk of his lips was the closest to an outright smile she had ever seen grace his face.

“You should be a Potions master’s apprentice,” he murmured as he swept out the door.

Hermione twirled once in place, punching the air and saying, “Yes!” as she had seen the boys do after scoring in a Quidditch match. Then her eyes fell on the unmoving form of Stormy, and she knew she ought not to celebrate prematurely. She crossed and dipped the waiting handkerchief into the lavender-scented water and bathed the burning skin of the child before she pulled the covers up and tucked Stormy back into the bed.



Snape staggered up the steps leading from the basement laboratory and headed for Stormy’s sickroom, the formula for the offending poison scribbled on the fragment of parchment clutched in his hand. He had left off his robes and his coat somewhere in the night; the soiled cuffs of his

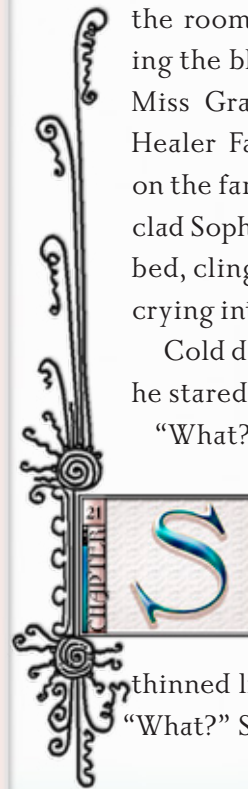


white shirt were rolled up on his forearms and the shirttail was partially untucked from his belted trousers.

He pushed the door to the spare bedroom open and paused in the doorway, the sunlight pouring in from the window dazzling his eyes for a moment. As he squinted, a figure across the room moved to pull the shade down, blocking the blinding glare. Snape became aware that Miss Granger was not alone in the sickroom; Healer Fairywinkle, the old fool, was standing on the far side of the bed, whilst a dressing-gown-clad Sophronia was seated on the near side of the bed, clinging to Skye and Shadow, who were each crying into her shoulder.

Cold dread clawed its way into Snape’s belly as he stared at the tableau before him.

“What?” he said.



SNAP **STOOD** in the doorway of the sickroom, surveying the occupants with swiftly contracted brows and thinned lips. In response to his fierce demand of, “What?” Shadow’s volume of crying increased and



Sophronia turned tragic eyes to his face. At last, Healer Fairywinkle took a hesitant step in his direction and began to speak.

“Professor, your sister’s condition has worsened,” the Healer said in a soothing voice.

Snape closed the door behind him with a snap, advancing into the room towards the bed. Sophronia stood, pulling her daughters up with her, to allow Snape access to Stormy. Seating himself at her side, he could see that beneath the fever-induced flush, her colour had gone a greyish-white and that the bedclothes scarcely stirred with her breathing.

“What happened?” he asked, his throat constricted in an odd way that prevented him from speaking loudly.

Miss Granger stepped away from the window to stand at the edge of the bed, directly across from Snape. “At around six this morning I noticed a change in her breathing and I Flooed for Healer Fairywinkle. Her respiration has dropped drastically and her pulse has become thready and erratic.”

Snape’s large hand covered the burning skin of the child’s sickly face; as if he were alone with her in the room, he took his wand in hand and thought, *Legilimens*.

It was like falling into a void. The desperately swirling confusion which had been present in her mind when he entered the night before was gone; it was like having a cloud of dark, damp fog descend upon him, cloaking him

in nothingness. It was not painful or distressing — it was simply a vacuum where once Stormy had been.

Snape broke the spell with a jerk of his upper body, gasping as if he had just kicked his way up from the bottom of a deep pond. Alarmed, Hermione seated herself on the other side of Stormy and reached a tentative hand out to him, stopping just short of touching his shoulder.

“Professor?” she murmured.

Snape opened his eyes and lifted his head, looking not into Hermione’s face, but through her, as if she was not there. “She isn’t ill; she has been poisoned,” he said in a curiously flat voice. “There is an antidote to the poison, but it must be brewed; it is not something I have on hand. It takes time — I must begin at once.”

Snape stood up from the bed, turning savage eyes to the Healer. “Do not attempt any healing spells; each attempt simply causes her to become weaker.” He took one menacing step toward the kindly older wizard. “Are we clear?”

Healer Fairywinkle fell back one step, wringing his hands in misery. “Of course, of course,” he whimpered, sincerely distressed by the condition of his patient.

Sophronia stepped away from her older daughters and grabbed Snape’s biceps in a violent grip. “How do you know, Severus?” she demanded forcefully. “How could that be?”

Snape met the eyes of his stepmother without flinch-

ing. “She ingested poisoned food or drink at the zoo, Sophronia. I was able to analyze a trace of vomit from her soft toy and to isolate the poison. I am — familiar — with this toxin; attempts to treat it with conventional healing spells cause the condition to worsen.”

Sophronia stared up into the face so much like that of the man who had been her husband, the father of her children. Anguish filled her eyes with tears, which fell upon her unnaturally white cheeks unchecked as she further tightened her hold upon Snape’s arms. “Can you save her?”

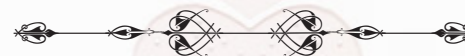
Snape stood within Sophronia’s relentless grip as if he were physically unable to break her hold. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “It’s possible that I can counteract the poison — but that will not reverse any damage already done to her internal organs.”

“Oh, why weren’t you *here*?” Sophronia’s voice rose to a wail as she inveighed against the chance which had brought her child to this place. Snape opened his mouth as if to answer, but she cut across him, shaking him with the violence of her emotion. “Go *brew* it, Severus Snape — make the potion to make her well, do you hear me?”

As suddenly as it had come upon her, the ferocity drained from Sophronia’s body and she sagged, releasing her hold on Snape and staggering back into the supporting arms of Skye and Shadow. “Severus,” she whispered, “please...”

With a curt nod to Sophronia, Snape stalked blindly out of the room, his feet, by instinct, taking him to his laboratory. All he could see was the blank death mask of Stormy’s face; all he could feel was the void that filled her once-turbulent mind; all he could hear were the reproaches of her distraught mother.

He was entirely unaware that he was being followed.



Snape reached the laboratory and paused at the counter, gripping the edge and holding with all his considerable strength, feeling the muscles in his arms trembling with the rigidity of his stance. He had to empty his mind of all emotion, all thought, save for the task ahead.

He was startled to hear the cellar door open and close again. Without turning, he snarled, “Get out.”

Rather than the panicked scurrying of elf-feet, which he expected to hear, he was conscious of a presence behind him, then before him as Miss Granger moved to stand on the other side of the work space. She had already retrieved one of his work-smocks from the peg by the door and was tying it about her waist; from about her wrist she retrieved an elastic and ruthlessly bound her hair back from her face, just as he had seen her do times out of mind in his own classroom. She then pulled a second

black elastic from her wrist and slapped it onto the counter between them. "Pull your hair back; I don't know how you can work with it hanging in your face like that."

His lip curled at her derisively. "I don't know what you think you're doing, Miss Granger, but get *out* of this room."

Her face took on an obstinate look which would have been entirely familiar to Harry and Ron; Snape, however, had yet to encounter this facet of Hermione.

"Don't be ridiculous, Professor. We have some work to do and we had best get to it."

Snape pulled himself together, his anger pushing Sophronia's voice from his mind. "I do not require your assistance," he spat.

Hermione slapped the surface between them. "She's *dying*, Professor! How many other N.E.W.T.-standard potioners do you see here, waiting to assist you?"

Black eyes held brown for several beats before Snape snatched the elastic from the counter and wordlessly tied the hopelessly greasy hair back from his darkly stubble-shaded face. Reaching for an unmarked parchment, he shoved it in her direction, followed by a battered quill.

"Take down these instructions," he barked, and she immediately grabbed the implements.

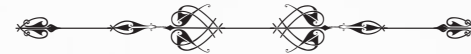
"What is the poison?" she asked as she dipped the quill into a nearby inkstand.



"It has no name," he answered.

"Then how do you know what it is?" she queried.

"Because I created it."



Sophonra dried her face and stared for a moment at the haggard person confronting her from the mirror. With a determined lift of her chin, she turned from the glass and walked from her bedroom to the room where Stormy lay. Skye and Shadow looked up anxiously as she entered.

"I'm all right," she said in calm tones. "Shadow, I would like for you to go to your brother's laboratory and see if he needs any ingredients from the apothecary. Skye, I would like for you to stay here with Stormy; I must speak with Sirius."

Unaccountably relieved at this return of the mother they knew, the girls moved to do her bidding.



The Dark Lord seldom had anyone about him who served only one purpose. Lucius Malfoy was useful because he was fabulously wealthy and he had influence at the Ministry of Magic. Bellatrix Lestranger was useful because she was insanely loyal and pathologically cruel. Snape was useful because he was a spy in Dumbledore's camp as well as a Potions master.

Snape's job was not completed simply by feeding information



regarding the movements of the Order of the Phoenix to Voldemort; he also was required to brew potions designed to suit the Dark Lord's fancy. Snape had lost count of the number of toxins he had created over the years he had spent as a lapdog of Tom Riddle. He had made it a point that he never presented the Dark Lord with a poison before an antidote had also been created. The Dark Lord never knew how many of his cruel, "unstoppable" potions had secret counter-agents hidden in Severus Snape's personal stores.

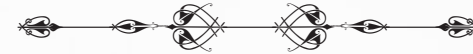
The potion which had been used to poison Stormy was a clear, azure blue compound which had been the last potion Snape had ever created to the Dark Lord's specifications. Voldemort had planned a dire attack on a Muggle village with the poison, but the Order of the Phoenix had forced the war to its climax before the village-poisoning plan had been implemented. To be on the safe side, Snape and Dumbledore had created a plan to counter the Dark Lord's scheme, and Snape had brewed the necessary quantities of the antidote. After Voldemort had fallen, Snape had been the one to lead the Aurors through the armoury, helping them to identify all the substances in the Dark Lord's arsenal and assisting in the destruction of the toxins. Once that job had been complete, Snape had seen no point in keeping stores of the antidote.

He had reckoned, however, without Alverard.

The poison in question would appeal to Alverard's driving need to torment his victims with the pain and suffering of their loved ones. Oh yes, Snape could perfectly understand why Alverard would wish



to use this poison against an enemy. There was a part of him, currently relegated to a subordinate place in his mind, which thought that, almost certainly, Alverard had also reckoned without him.



Hermione stared. "You created it?"

Snape had turned from her and was pulling ingredients from the shelves at his back. "As the Dark Lord's Potions master, it was my job to create potions to accomplish his aims. This potion was one of his."

"Then you have an antidote." Hermione spoke with absolute certainty.

"I have a *formula* for an antidote," he corrected, placing the last ingredient container on the counter and turning back to face her.

"Do we have everything we need? How long will it take?"

"We do not have everything we need. Some things are at Hogwarts; others must be obtained from the apothecary." He frowned now, staring at a spot on the wall over her shoulder as he thought. "This potion usually takes forty-eight hours to prepare, but we do not have forty-eight hours. I must devise an accelerant."

The cellar door opened and Shadow approached warily. Snape directed his attention to her with a glare.

"What is it?" he demanded.



“Mum wants to know if you will be needing ingredients from the apothecary, Severus.”

Snape opened his mouth to deliver himself of his opinion regarding the skills of non-Potions-masters at shopping for fresh, potent potions ingredients, but before he could speak, Miss Granger said, “Thank you, Shadow. We’ll put a list together and have one of the house-elves bring it to you, all right?”

Shadow nodded gratefully to Hermione before hastily retreating.

“Just *don’t*,” Hermione said, holding up one hand in a halting gesture. “I’m sure there are parts of this which require less specialized skill, only competence — those are the things I can do for you. There are other things that *only* you will be able to do.” She looked up into his face, her quill poised over the parchment. “I know you prefer to work alone, sir, but you obviously haven’t slept in a while; you need to reserve your strength for the things with which I cannot help you. *Use me.*”

The vehemence with which the last words were spoken overcame the last of Snape’s resistance. Without acknowledging her words, he began to speak in his classroom voice and she began to copy down his instructions with fervid attention.

Sirius glanced over the parchment his Sophie had handed to him, noting the items and the quantities.

“Is this all?” he asked her.

Sophronia replied, “He has everything else he needs. Shadow said he emphasised that the sixteen-inch cauldron must be made of pure silver and not an alloy. Oh, and you’re to tell the shopkeeper that these things are for Professor Snape.”

Sirius nodded. “That will put the fear of God in them,” he muttered, folding the list and slipping it into his inner pocket.

He began to leave and she spoke again. “Thank you, Siri.”

Turning back to her, Sirius pulled his beloved into the enveloping, comforting embrace of his arms and rested his cheek on her golden hair. “I would give everything I have and do anything in my power to prevent you from feeling one moment of unhappiness, Sophie. Never hesitate to ask for what you need from me.”

Sophronia allowed herself to relax, for just a moment, into the man’s strong body, her small hands clutching at the back of his robes. What a temptation it was to allow him to take over this terrible ordeal for her, to consume the potions pressed upon her by Healer Fairywinkle and retire to her bedroom for the house-elves to pamper and spoil her while crisis reigned in her home. But who would

care for Stormy? Who would love and encourage Stormy as much as her mama would — who else could demand with as much insistence that Stormy wake *up* and be well?

Swallowing her weakness, she stepped back from Sirius. “Go now, please.”

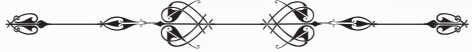
With one final caress of her soft cheek, Sirius made his way to the entrance hall, where he came upon Lucius Malfoy, who was in the act of handing his walking stick and cloak into the eager hands of a house-elf. Sirius stopped, and grey eyes met grey eyes as the two men each took the measure of the other.

Sirius broke the silence. “We have cause to be grateful to you, Malfoy, for finding Snape and bringing him home to his family.”

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed as his mind searched for the barb in Black’s words, but he could find none. Though he resented Black’s use of “we,” he inclined his head minutely to indicate acknowledgement.

Sirius continued past Lucius, speaking over his shoulder as the ubiquitous house-elf opened the great oaken door so that he might exit. “Sophie is in the blue salon, just through the hallway and to the left.”

Malfoy felt his ire rise at Black’s casual proprietary attitude, but he restrained himself, simply sweeping through the hallway and to the left, seeking the solace of a moment with Sophronia.



Snape took the parchment from Miss Granger’s hands, reading through the notes she had taken as he iterated the steps they would need to take to assemble the antidote. Reaching to her again, he removed the quill from her hand and began to check off certain items on the page, scrawling “HG” by some of them in his spiky script, while he put “SS” by the others. When he had completed that operation, he tapped the page with his wand and murmured a spell, causing the two sets of instructions to realign themselves according to the assigned initials. That done, he drew the wand down the center of the parchment, neatly dividing it into two lists.

“Begin these two bases,” he said, indicating the first two steps on her list. “I must go to Hogwarts to retrieve some things. I have some texts which list possible accelerants, but I do not know which will be appropriate for this potion. I will have to study them.”

Hermione watched as the deep furrow between his brows creased further and he absent-mindedly rubbed his eyes. “Are you well enough to Disapparate, sir?”

Stepping away from her, Snape unlocked his cupboard and took down the wards, bringing out two stoppered phials. “When did you last sleep, Miss Granger?”

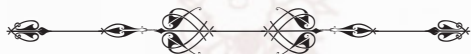
“More recently than you have, sir,” she replied.

“Answer the question,” he snapped.

“I slept yesterday, from dawn until noon. When did *you* sleep last, sir?” She was tired enough to be irritable and cranky; she was amazed when he actually answered her question.

“I slept from midnight Friday night until dawn Saturday morning; I have been up for a bit longer than forty-eight hours.” He uncorked a phial and poured the contents down his throat, then placed the other within her reach. “It is an Invigoration Draught; I will leave it to your discretion when you will ingest it.”

He did not dawdle, but left the cellar. Hermione pushed up her sleeves and picked up her silver knife to begin chopping her ingredients.



On the ground floor of the Estuary, at the end of the corridor leading from the Entrance Hall, was a small, sunny room which was known as the young ladies' sitting room. In this room sat Ron Weasley, across a chessboard from his eldest brother, Bill, who moved his bishop diagonally across the board and smashed Ron's knight to the floor.

“Ron, if you're not going to pay attention, I would prefer not to play,” he said patiently.

Ron and Bill had been spending hours a day sitting in the small parlour, keeping out of the way of the house-



elves and of Madam Snape, while being available to spend time with Shadow and Skye when they had the leisure to come sit down for a few minutes. Both young men held themselves ready at any time to run any errand that offered, but thus far the young ladies had not given them much scope for their desire to be of service.

“It is such a comfort just to be with you for a few moments,” Skye had told Bill as he pulled her into a comforting hug, when he had lamented over his lack of usefulness to her. Having been disciplined for a period of time which had seemed to stretch for an eternity, he had recused himself from the role of protector once Skye had removed from Grimmauld Place to the Estuary and now permitted himself to woo and pursue her with the full force of his substantial charm. Their stolen minutes were sweet, if darkened by the spectre of Stormy's illness, and neither of them was in doubt of their desire to pledge themselves to one another.

Ron brought his gaze back to the chessboard and moved his castle.

“Checkmate,” he said.

Bill stared at the board, mentally reviewing each possible move of his king and saw that each move would put him in check.

“Bugger,” he muttered, beginning to replace the chess pieces in their cushioned box.



“Mum owled me,” Ron said. “She wants to know how I’m getting on with meeting the girls on that list she gave me.”

Bill continued nestling the chess pieces in their proper places. “When are you going to tell her that you want to marry Shadow?”

Ron shrugged disconsolately. “It hardly seems worth the screaming when the Snapes aren’t willing to agree yet.”

Bill closed the lid on the box of chess pieces and leaned towards his brother, placing both elbows squarely on the table. “Ron, if you have any chance at all to make this happen — and I’m not saying that you do, if the Snapes can’t be brought around to your way of thinking — you’re going to have to stand up and be a man. Nothing else is going to get Madam Snape to take you seriously, and certainly nothing less will earn the professor’s respect.”

“Are you saying I’m not a man?” Ron demanded, incensed.

“Don’t be thick. I saw you duelling men with three times your battle experience; I know you’re a man. It’s time to tell *Mum* that you’re a man, Ron. We all have to do it, eventually. She always cries, but she’s used to it by now; it’s happened to her five times before, already.”

Ron looked speculatively into Bill’s face as he pondered what had been said; after a moment, his lips began to twitch. Bill responded with a smile.

“What is it?”

Ron’s grin infused his voice with hilarity. “D’you think *Percy* has told Mum he’s a man?”

Bill’s chuckles blended with Ron’s as he slapped his youngest brother on the shoulder. “Good point, mate,” Bill said.



Percy Weasley considered himself to be a man of good sense. Though he felt sincerely sorry for the little Snape girl, and concerned by his Hermione’s decision to assist with the nursing of the child, he had no intention of subjecting his person to the dangers of infection. He was horrified, when upon a visit to Grimmauld Place for tidings of the invalid, he discovered that his brothers were regular visitors to the sick house.

“It’s foolish of them!” he exclaimed to Ginny, who delivered the information.

Ginny gave him a look of vague distaste. “They care about her, Percy. And they’re courting Stormy’s sisters — of course they want to be there for them.”

Percy’s brows rose. “I thought Bill was rather particular in his attentions to the eldest, but I never dreamed that Ron was serious about the middle girl — she isn’t even seventeen yet, is she?”

Ginny looked at her wristwatch and stood. “Harry and I are going to play Quidditch in the park, Percy. Was there

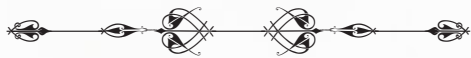
anything else in particular you wanted?"

Handily dislodged from Grimmauld Place, Percy decided to go share this latest information with his surest source of attentive conversation.

"I agree with you completely," Fleur said, pouring tea from the steaming pot into a teacup, which she passed to Percy with perfect grace. "It is entirely unnecessary for them to be so careless! Are there not Healers and house-elves for such duties?"

Percy had begun to make a habit of calling upon the Delacours on a regular basis, so that he could learn what news they might have from the Estuary and share with them his own gleanings from persistent visits to Grimmauld Place. Fleur and he were in complete accord regarding the wisdom of staying away from Stormy's vicinity until she was well. After all, of what possible use could it be for them to become ill simply for the sake of visiting the sick child?

It never occurred to them that neither would have been wanted by those who were so faithfully keeping watch over Stormy.



Hermione scarcely noticed when the cellar door opened and Sirius descended, his arms wrapped about a silver cauldron. He approached her workplace and set the cauldron



down, beginning to unload the cauldron's contents and to line the ingredients up in alphabetical order.

Arriving at a stopping place in her work of stirring anti-clockwise precisely twenty-seven times, Hermione set down her stirring rod, coming to investigate his actions.

"Do you need help with chopping things up, Hermione? It's been a long time, but I was good at Potions."

"Thanks, Sirius, but I have it under control. Good heavens! Why on earth did you buy so many strands of unicorn hair? They are preposterously expensive!"

Sirius pulled the list from his pocket. "It just said 'unicorn hair,' without specifying an amount," he pointed out defensively. "For Stormy's sake, I wanted to be sure Snape has everything he needs."

"Excellent," a silky voice purred from the top of the steps. "Snape needs for you to vacate his *personal* laboratory and to never enter it again."

The irritated Potions master descended the steps, his own arms full of books, and swept past the enemy of his schooldays.

"I only want to help," Sirius said evenly.

"Then *help* yourself out the door!" Snape snarled.

"You're doing an excellent job of supporting Sophronia's spirits," Hermione said in a placating way to Sirius. "Thank you for going to the shops for these things."



Sirius gave Hermione half a smile and reached over to wipe a smudge of ash from her cheek with his thumb. "Hang in there," he murmured to her.

Snape looked up from placing his books on the counter just in time to witness Black's hand upon Hermione's face. "And do not fail to take Miss Granger with you," he added spitefully. "I don't know why she insisted upon staying here."

Hermione turned her own fulminating gaze upon her former professor. "The bases are resting; I have timed it so that they will be ready for the next components at the same time, when the timer sounds. You will find the ingredients on the tray between the cauldrons, prepared and waiting in the order in which they must be added." She pushed carelessly past him, bumping his arm with her shoulder, and snatched a book from the top of his pile. "I will attempt to nap for one hour, because it is the *wise* thing to do," she tossed over her shoulder as she preceded Sirius up the cellar steps, though her manner clearly added the words, *and not because you told me to leave*. "I will be back in one hour."

Snape uttered a string of filthy swear words as the cellar door banged shut behind the unaccountable Miss Granger.



Nymphadora Tonks looked up from the magazine in



her lap when she heard the bell chime. She was expecting Viktor; they were to attend a Ministry function that evening, and he was a bit late. She put the periodical down upon the coffee table and stood to check her appearance in the mirror over the mantelpiece.

"Don't bother — you look lovely," a husky voice commented from the doorway.

Tonks felt the colour flood her face as she whirled to see Remus Lupin standing in the room, his sober topaz eyes fastened on her unblinkingly. The knowledge that they were only hours away from the next full moon insinuated itself in her mind as she found herself unable to look away from him. She felt as if he were scenting her, as a predator will sense weakness or fear in its prey; the sensation pervaded her, until all the skin of her body was pebbled with gooseflesh, whilst the palms of her hands were damp with nervous perspiration.

"H-Hermione isn't here," she blurted nervously.

The sound of her voice broke his concentration, and Remus blinked, as if clearing his mind.

"I know where Hermione is," he assured her, advancing another step into the room. "I also know where Severus, Sirius, and Bill are. I came to see if Minerva needs my assistance with anything, before I become — indisposed, for a bit."

"Remus," Minerva said, spotting him from the landing.

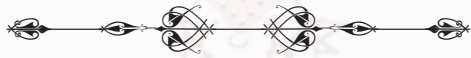


Remus turned to look up at Minerva, whilst downstairs, the bell chimed again.

“Come speak with me in the study,” Minerva invited him.

There were voices below, and Viktor Krum began to walk up from the ground floor. Remus turned back to Tonks, who was still standing in the same spot, as if unable to take a step. “Have a nice time, tonight,” he said to her, before going up to Minerva.

Tonks turned back to the mirror again, putting her back to the doorway, for she did not wish for Viktor to see her until the deep blush receded. That look on Remus’ face — had it been longing?



Hermione burst into the cellar one hour later, thundering down the stairs with no regard for the noise. Snape looked up from the texts open before him; his eyes now appeared to have sunk into his skull, so dark were the circles surrounding them. His long fingers were spotted with ink and several quill corpses littered the work surface. The intensity of his gaze would have been daunting to a more sensible person.

“I think I’ve found it!” Hermione said, placing a paper sack before him and hefting the book she had nicked from him earlier onto the counter.



Snape flicked a finger at the paper sack. “What is this?”

“Two sandwiches and an apple. You will be of no use to anyone if you faint from lack of nourishment.” She opened the book to a section which she had marked by placing a Honeyduke’s chocolate bar wrapper between the pages. “The purpose of the long maturation time is for the potion to thicken to the necessary consistency, correct?” she said.

Snape took a napkin from the sack and unwrapped it to reveal a thick sandwich, into which he promptly bit; after a moment of cogitation, he nodded in agreement.

Had she been paying attention, Hermione might have been startled by the lack of formality in Snape’s attitude towards her, which had begun the moment he relented and allowed her to assist him with the brewing of the antidote. A combination of exhaustion and unaccustomed susceptibility, engendered by Sophronia’s earlier attack, had somehow sent him outside of the walls he used to keep others away from him. He had ordered Hermione from the room earlier in a fit of pique because jealousy had flared when he saw Black touch her. His emotions were totally out of his control; all of his will was focussed on completing the antidote, and there was no energy left for any other concern.

Neither of them commented on his earlier petulant dismissal of her from the laboratory, nor on her defiant return.



Hermione was rereading the section she had marked, one finger following down the column. Almost idly, having finished the second sandwich and now eating the apple, Snape's finger flipped out again, this time to give the sweets wrapper a nudge.

"What is this?" he inquired.

"It's a bookmark," she snapped, thrusting the item in question into her pocket, mortified that she had not considered that he would recognize the Honeyduke's wrapper. Hermione blushed; he would know perfectly well where it had come from and why she had kept it.

"It looks like a sweets wrapper."

"Oh, well spotted," she sniped. "It is a sweets wrapper."

"Since when do you eat dark chocolate?"

"Since when do you notice what I eat?"

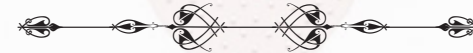
Snape finished the apple and tossed the core into the waste bin with the detritus of the rest of his meal, standing to cross to the sink and to wash his hands. The knowledge that she had kept the sweets wrapper — or one identical to it — from their adventure in the cabin filled him with satisfaction; quite conveniently, he forgot the handkerchief drenched with her scent which resided in his office, in the furthest corner of his upper desk drawer.

Now he came to stand behind her, staring down at the page over her shoulder.

"I was amazed to find it listed amongst the possible accelerants," Hermione told him, struggling to keep her mind on her discovery, in spite of his looming presence. "It is such a simple substance, and will have no negative interactions with the active ingredients in the potion. Muggles use it quite often in cooking, you know."

"What is it?" he inquired, bending his head as if to draw closer to the words printed on the page, stealing another breath of her hair in the process.

"It's corn flour."



Sophonra sat quietly in the chair by the window, watching as the full moon rose in the sky. She had sent the girls to bed earlier, pointing out that they would need to be fresh to sit with Stormy in the morning, for Sophronia would have to sleep sometime. She knew very well that they would go down to the room where their swains waited for them, but she did not care. Comfort was scarce upon the ground at the Estuary these days, and she did not begrudge her daughters finding it where they might.

Sirius had left her against his will before moonrise; he knew that Lupin would be confined to his special room in the basement of Phoenix House, and Sirius had to be there on the off chance that one of the boys might need

him. It had pained her heart to have him leave her, for now it seemed that she only felt complete when he was by her side; his very presence was like a balm to her spirit.

Comfort was an odd thing, really. Had not Lucius Malfoy sought her out that day to find comfort in her presence, though she had precious little to impart? She must be forever grateful to him for the effort he expended in finding Severus and sending him home — she had to believe, for Stormy’s sake, that Severus had not arrived too late — but even rendering such a signal service to her did not cause Sophronia to regard Lucius as other than a very kind friend who had come to her assistance in her hour of need. Sirius Black had been the love of her life since she was fifteen years old; Lucius could not hope to compete against that.

She was roused from her meditations when the door opened and Hermione entered, with Severus behind her. Hope brought Sophronia to her feet as well; she murmured the spell to light the candles, then seated herself on the side of the bed, her expectant eyes fixed on the phial in Severus’ hand.

“Is it —?” she breathed, afraid to speak the words aloud.

Severus nodded to her. “I need for you to sit at the head of the bed and to raise Stormy to rest against you. We must induce her to swallow the potion.”



Sophronia seated herself against the headboard, and pulled Stormy into a half-sitting position, causing the child’s head to come to rest in the crook of her elbow; deftly, she used her fingers to pry Stormy’s mouth open. Severus moved in then and used a large-bore dropper to deposit a small amount of the viscous liquid at the back of Stormy’s tongue. Sophronia then massaged her throat, until the potion moved down into her oesophagus. Over and over their movements were repeated, until the last of the potion had been coaxed into Stormy’s digestive system. Severus moved back and Hermione stepped forward to help lower Stormy to her pillow again.

Sophronia stood and fetched the chair from the window, pulling it to the bedside. “What do we do now?” she asked.

Severus wordlessly conjured two wooden chairs across from Sophronia, and he and Hermione sat down.

“Now, we wait.”



First there was heat, miserable, inescapable heat, causing thirst, parching, and there was aching, all over. She moved her head, searching for a cooler spot, but there was none to be found.

“She moved her head! Did you see?”

Snape took Stormy’s hand and murmured, “*Legilimens!*” before dropping his wand and placing his other hand on



her forehead. Within seconds, he was immersed in emotion, discomfort, distress — and cognizance. Opening his eyes, he spoke to his stepmother.

“Call her out of it, Sophronia. Tell her to wake up.”

With tiny sobs in each breath, Sophronia reached out to pull the fever-ridden body of her baby into her arms and began to speak to her in a voice roughened by tears.

“Stormy, wake up now. Wake up! You’ve slept long enough and it’s time for you to wake up. If you — if you don’t wake up right now, Mummy will be cross!”

The little head tossed again, this time against her mother’s shoulder.

“She’s trying!” Sophronia sobbed, now rocking back and forth as she held the child to her bosom.

“She’s going to have to try harder,” Snape said harshly, reaching across the mattress to place a large hand on Stormy’s back. “Stormy! Wake up this instant! Do not keep your mother waiting.”

The small body suddenly snapped into rigidity and Snape lunged to take her from her mother, fearing a seizure; Sophronia, by instinct, refused to release her child.

“Mummy?”

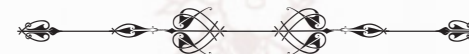
The tiny voice, which had not been heard for five long days, froze them all in their tracks, uncertain, at first, that they could believe the evidence of their ears.

“Mummy, I’m thirsty,” Stormy croaked.

“Of course you are, precious,” Sophronia sobbed, stroking the fevered little face.

Snape and Hermione turned to one another, and without thought, fell into each other’s arms, Hermione’s relieved tears drenching his stained shirtfront. If, by chance, tears fell also into Hermione’s hair, Snape would never be brought to admit it.

They stayed that way until Nanny Apparated into the room with cool water for her charge, and shooed them away. “Shower and sleep, Master Severus, and Nanny is not wanting to see you again until you have slept for twelve hours!” the little creature nagged at him with fierce concern.



The next few days were halcyon ones, completely removed from any reality which might be awaiting them all outside the doors of the Estuary. Healer Fairywinkle determined, and his findings were confirmed by Healer Howser, who agreed to pop in for a second opinion, that though her heart seemed to be somewhat weakened by the assault of the poison, Stormy’s constitution was strong enough that she would make a full recovery, now that the toxin in her body had been counteracted. Within the first twenty-four hours, the assiduous application of

fever-reduction charms broke the fever which had ravaged Stormy since the onset of her illness, leaving her weak and emaciated, but on the mend.

Snape had fallen into his bed and slept for sixteen hours after leaving Stormy's bedside. For the first two days, he visited the sickroom frequently, casting his own diagnostic spells, watching for the least sign of relapse. Though there had been nothing built into the poison to cause it to reactivate after a period of dormancy, Snape was determined to be vigilant; too well he knew that one ought not to make assumptions regarding the efficacy of potions when faced with the mystery of the human body.

When he was not sleeping or haunting the sick room, Snape took refuge in the room which had once been his father's library, sitting in one of the deep armchairs with his booted feet up on an ottoman, indulging himself in whatever reading material took his fancy. One day he came into the room after breakfast to find Miss Granger there before him, curled up with a volume of Jane Austen; he did not eject her, but inquired as to what she was reading, then went to the shelf and took down a second copy of the same novel, beginning to read with calm enjoyment.

It became their custom to discuss the novel, *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*, at every opportunity, frequently amusing Snape's sisters by their barbed exchanges over meals,

or carrying on their debates during long, winding walks along the pathways through the grounds of the Estuary.

The Snape women often watched them with curious expressions, then would shake their heads over the puzzling behaviour and get on with their daily lives. Only Nanny watched with a sharp, knowing eye, and muttered to herself that there was trouble a-coming.

By Snape's instructions, it was not made public knowledge that Stormy's coma had been due to poisoning, rather than illness. In fact, Snape forbade Sophronia and the girls to pass on any information regarding Stormy's recovery to Fleur, stating simply that if she had not seen fit to be by their sides when Stormy was unconscious, he saw no need of her assistance now that Stormy was on the mend.

The patient herself, however, was becoming fractious as she began to regain some strength. Nanny, who had long been overly-lenient with Stormy, and who had become positively indulgent now that she was recovering, had no control over the child when it came time to make her take her medicine. Snape was ruthless enough to tip the foul brews down her throat when called upon to assist, but this upset Stormy so much that Sophronia and Skye put him from the room and determined new ways to cope with the easily-upset eight year old.

It was after midnight on the evening one week after

he had arrived at the Estuary from France; it was time for Stormy's next dose of the potion to strengthen her heart. He slipped into her room and found Hermione, reading by the fire with a screen guarding the occupant of the bed from the extra light.

"You should not be up so late," he said to her, bending over to see the title on the page she was reading. "On to *Sense and Sensibility* now, hmm?"

Hermione looked up at him over her shoulder, her eyes crinkling as she smiled. "Oh, do you have a second copy of this one, too?"

Snape leaned one shoulder against the mantelpiece, his hands negligently disposed in his trouser pockets. "I can't have you getting ahead of me, can I?"

Hermione simply shook her head, moving to retrieve a cup of milk from the table by the window. "When I wake her to take her medicine, you can coax her to drink her milk," she told him.

Snape did not argue, but took the cup and seated himself in the chair behind the screen as Hermione went to wake Stormy.

"I don't *want* to take the potion! Severus makes it taste bad on purpose!"

Hermione lifted Stormy's shoulders and held her cradled against her heart as she shook out the wrinkles in the pillowcase and plumped the pillow before settling

Stormy back against it again.

"It hurts when you lift me up!"

Hermione smiled at the child and poured the potion out into a glass. "Come on and take your medicine, and then I will tidy you up so that you can receive your visitor," she promised.

Stormy's tempestuous expression brightened. "Severus?"

"Yes, Severus is come to see you, but you must let me tidy you up before you see him; gentlemen are not accustomed to seeing young ladies with snarls in their hair!"

Snape sat quietly behind the screen, marvelling at the way the young witch handled his irritable little sister; Nanny would indulge the child, Snape himself would shout and threaten, but Hermione kept up a flow of small talk and persuaded Stormy to do what was needed without ruffling the child's sensibilities too much.

At last she had bathed the still-skeletal little body and attired her in a fresh nightgown, then settled her back into her bed, countering her complaining with promises of treats to come, the first of which was a visit with her brother.

Snape cast a warming charm on the milk and went to sit beside Stormy. "See, I have brought you the cup with the pink flowers," he told her as he gave it to her.

Stormy accepted the cup but a cranky frown obscured her face. "I don't *want* milk," she fussed.

Hermione seated herself across the bed from Snape

and spoke to Stormy again. “Remember that I promised to tell you a story while you drink all your milk?”

Stormy took an obedient sip and turned her face to Hermione. “I want the story about the fountain and the bubbles again,” she demanded.

“All right, but take another drink of milk first,” Hermione bargained, answering Snape’s humorously quirked eyebrow with an incandescent smile which fairly took his breath away.

Stormy drank her milk without further complaint as Hermione told the story, with frequent interruptions from Stormy, who obviously had the tale by heart and prompted Hermione with favourite details. Hermione had answered affirmatively that Harry, Ron, Ginny, Draco, and Luna had been there, and Stormy’s energy was flagging.

“Was Severus there?” Stormy asked sleepily, as Snape took the cup from her hand and placed it safely on the table beside the bed.

“Oh, yes, he was there,” Hermione assured her, “but he is a teacher, and he could not splash in the fountain with the students.”

Stormy’s eyes closed and Hermione stopped speaking, watching the child carefully, searching for signs that she had slipped into sleep. When the little chest began to rhythmically rise and fall, Hermione looked up to smile at Snape, only to find him gazing at her with an expres-

sion of unmitigated wonder.

Unafraid, Hermione returned his gaze, a soft, knowing smile curving her lips. In that moment, she felt that she was wholly open to the stuff of dreams, to the possibilities of reality, and to the very fabric of life itself. She waited, in complete acceptance, for his next move.

Snape saw her as if for the first time, entire and absolute before him. The knowledge of what she represented and of what he had done dropped upon him and collided with the fantasy life he had been living these last happy days. Involuntarily, he reached his hand to her, across the body of the sleeping child, then pulled back and wrenched himself from the chair, walking from the room.

CHILD DIES OF MYSTERY ILLNESS; AREA UNDER QUARANTINE

BY RITA SKEETER

THE ESTUARY, HAMPSHIRE — Stormy Siobhan Snape, sister of war hero Professor Severus Snape, died Sunday night of an unidentified disease. Stormy was eight years old. In addition to her brother, Stormy is survived by her

mother, Sophronia Prewett Snape, and two older sisters, Skye and Shadow Snape.

The cause of Stormy's illness is unknown. The Ministry of Magic, in conjunction with the Office of Plague and Pestilence Control, has established a quarantine at the Snape country estate, called the Estuary, posting a one mile perimeter around the estate boundaries. No visitors are being allowed in, and none of the family or staff members are being permitted to leave the area under quarantine.

"This is an effort to safeguard the wizarding community until this disease can be isolated and classified," said an unnamed

Ministry official.

Professor Snape is away from home and his whereabouts are uncertain. He is thought to have travelled out of the country. Anyone with any information regarding Professor Snape's current location is urged to contact the Ministry of Magic immediately, so that the professor can be apprised of his sister's death.

The burial will be a private affair in the family plot on the grounds of the estate.

There will be a memorial service held when the quarantine has been lifted. The family requests that no flowers be sent at this time.

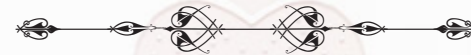
Alverard's face creased in a smile that was unpleasant to see when Mulciber thrust the DAILY PROPHECY under his nose.

"That's one down," Alverard said, feasting his eyes on the

photograph of Madam Snape and her three daughters which graced the front page of the newspaper. "They've put the place under quarantine — that will really get up Snape's nose."

Mulciber and Macnair exchanged uneasy glances over Alverard's next words.

"I believe that we need reinforcements, Walden. It is time to call on the reserves."



"I don't *want* to stay in bed! I want to play!"

Skye sat on the side of the bed, gently restraining her youngest sister. "Stormy, love, you know what Healer Fairywinkle said! A few more days of bed rest and then you can get up for a little while each day."

"I won't! I'm tired of being in bed!"

"But we have all of these nice games you can play in bed, sweetheart." Skye used her free hand to gesture to the small bookshelf near the bed, its shelves overflowing with picture books, puzzles, and packs of playing cards. "I'm sure Ron will come up and play Old Hag with you in a little while — and then Bill will read some more of the story about the Unicorn Princess. And Sirius promised he would draw some pictures for you to colour."

A tempest of angry tears was Stormy's only answer to her sister's cajoling.

"I want Fletcher! He misses me! I want Fletcher! Let me go!"

Sophronia entered the room and swiftly crossed to the bed, seating herself and gathering the sobbing child into her arms. "Please ask Nanny to send Severus to me," she said to Skye over the wailing child, gently smoothing Stormy's silky blond hair. Skye stood to do her mama's bidding and Sophronia addressed Stormy. "My love, if you do not stop crying, you are going to wake Hermione. You know she stays awake all night watching over you while you sleep and she is very tired in the mornings. Do you want to wake up Hermione?"

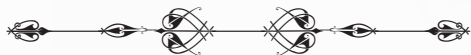
Stormy made an effort to stop her crying; she would not do anything to hurt Hermione — Hermione was Stormy's best friend! But she was so bored, so tired of being in that bed in that room and never being allowed to walk and play and roam the house and go outdoors. It was not fair!

"Mummy, who's taking care of Fletcher?"

"Dobby and Winky are taking care of Fletcher, precious."

"But they don't have time to *play* with him! He's bored and he misses me and he wants to play. I want Fletcher!"

Sophronia murmured and petted and soothed, riding out yet another Stormy storm.



Snape sat in his private study, which could only be reached



by traversing his bedroom. As it was not a room held in common by the family, he could be relatively sure that he would not be disturbed. His bedroom and private study were now the only Gryffindor-free zones in the house.

His house. Flooded with a *pride* of Gryffindors. It made him want to bang his head against the nearest hard surface. He eyed the highly burnished plane of his desk speculatively.

When he had first returned to England from France, Snape had gone straight to Minerva McGonagall to discuss not only Stormy's condition, but to convey to McGonagall the information regarding the Death Eaters who were seeking him out. He had to hasten to Stormy, but he also had to provide for the safety of all of his family — including Miss Delacour. She was his affianced wife, and her well-being was as much his responsibility as was the security of his sisters and their mother. Minerva readily agreed to contact members of the Order for assistance in mounting a guard over Fleur Delacour while Severus was busy looking after his family during Stormy's illness. At her suggestion, Tonks was summoned to the meeting, and Snape gave Tonks what information he possessed concerning the visit the Death Eaters had made to Lucius Malfoy. Tonks took notes and agreed to file a report with the Auror office, after gathering further information from Lucius. Consenting to be in touch at regular inter-



vals, Snape left Grimmauld Place.

In the week since Stormy had awakened from her coma, Snape had spent part of each day in consultation and planning with Minerva and various other Order members. Thus far, no new reports had come in as to the location or the movements of Alverard and his confederates. Snape, though somewhat distracted by the events of the last week at the Estuary, had continued to mull over in his mind the way in which he would rid the world, once and for all, of the menace of the Dark Lord's Interrogator. Sophronia, when questioned, had asked only that he make every other possible effort before taking the drastic action he had suggested to her to draw out the Death Eaters.

The fury of protests, which had broken over his head when he informed his sisters of the plan, had brought on a migraine of the sort he had not suffered since he was in France. The idyllic week of reading and talking with Hermione had given him a respite from his usual tension-filled days in ways which he was as yet unable to consider. Since the night he had walked out of Stormy's room, having suffered one of the most painful epiphanies of his misbegotten life, he had returned to his rigid avoidance of Hermione Granger in every way, at every opportunity. Thus far, he had succeeded marvellously; not only had he managed not to be alone in a room with her since that night, but he had

also avoided so much as laying eyes upon her, except from down a hallway or across a roomful of other people.

Unfortunately, his newfound understanding gave him an unnerving sympathy for his sisters — and even his stepmother — in their desire to spend time with their swains. In a moment of utter insanity, he had given his permission for the Gryffindors to be invited to stay as guests at the Estuary during the “quarantine.” If his days were now made hideous by not only the duty of avoiding the companionship of the one person he wished to see, but additionally by the sight of his sisters and their mother consorting with Gryffindors, he had no one but himself to blame.

On the bright side, he had perfected the castigation of self-blame to an art form.

The matter was not as simple as the poets and philosophers would have one believe. In fact, for Severus Snape, “falling in love” was not an event to be celebrated; rather, it was a catastrophe of cataclysmic proportions. In effect, it was not dissimilar to an earthquake — the actual foundation upon which his life had been based had come undone. His once stable and explicable life had degenerated into a scene of constant emotional upheaval and unruly impulses to take actions which were at best, irresponsible, and at worst, demented.

Control of himself and his environment had been

his overriding objective since he was sixteen years old; now events were spiralling out of his control and he was coping in the only fashion he knew: He held himself with a sternness which alarmed virtually his entire household and avoided the cause of his discomfort like the plague.

In the privacy of his study, he could examine this disintegration of the fabric of his existence at self-torturing length. He spent hours chastising himself for being as vulnerable and needy as he had been in his youth, when he had pathetically longed for the kindness, for the smile — and in his more daring moments — for the *touch* of a female. Just about any female would do. His heart had yearned for the recognition and tenderness which had come to him, thus far, only from his nurse, the house-elf, Nanny. In those sad days, the only safe place to be a Slytherin had been in their dungeon common room, where he had soaked up the friendly affection of girls such as Varen Vector the way a plant absorbs sunlight. His secret yearning for Lily Evans had never been pursued or assuaged in any way. He had never found fulfilment of those adolescent fantasies then — why should he permit himself to indulge such nonsense again? Was it premature senility, to revert in this wretched way before he even reached his fortieth birthday?

He was thinking what satisfaction might be found by soundly smacking his aching forehead into the surface of

his desk when Nanny popped into the room.

“I did not call for you,” he snapped dismissively.

“There is no need for you to be so rude, Master Severus,” Nanny reproved, unflustered by his manner.

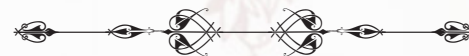
“Need I remind you that it is I who am now master at the Estuary?” he inquired dangerously.

“Nanny knows who is who at the Estuary, Master Severus. When you start acting like the master, Nanny will be happy to call you the master.” Ignoring his glower, Nanny added, “Mistress is asking for you, in Miss Stormy’s room.”

Snape sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Tantrum?”

“Crying herself into another collapse, Master Severus. Don’t keep Mistress waiting!” And with that admonition, Nanny snapped her fingers and was gone.

Checking the clock over the mantel to make sure it was still Miss Granger’s sleeping time, Snape swept out of his rooms.



Minerva McGonagall started like a hare when the green flames burst upwards in the fireplace in her bedroom at Grimmauld Place; in another moment, Severus Snape stepped down into the room.

“Honestly, Severus!” she exclaimed, her hand pressed to her chest. “You gave me such a fright!”

“Unused to having men step into your bedroom, Min-

erva?" he returned snidely. "It's not as if you did not know I was coming."

Wisely deciding to ignore the taunt, Minerva moved on; Severus looked to be in a truly foul mood, and her experience with his nastiness at such times did not encourage her to engage him in verbal sparring.

"Keep your voice down! You're supposed to be under quarantine!"

"Is there someone in the house other than Order members and house-elves?"

"No — but you should be careful, nonetheless."

Snape scowled and brushed ash from his robes. "Where is that cursed Pygmy Puff?"

Minerva shook her head regretfully. "I don't know, Severus. I've had the house-elves searching for it all over the house; I've looked through the nursery and the surrounding rooms. What are you going to do if it's disappeared?"

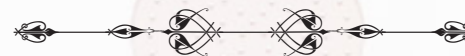
"You'll have to go to Diagon Alley to buy another one; we're having the very devil of a time keeping the child in her bed. She'll never know the difference — all pink Pygmy Puffs look alike, do they not?"

Minerva looked sincerely distressed. "Poor lamb! Children do hate to be bedridden. Is she truly unwell enough still to have to stay abed?"

"Her strength is returning slowly; if she would stop

fighting so hard and conserve her energy, she would undoubtedly be able to get up sooner." Snape glanced at the clock on Minerva's mantel; it was nearing noon and he wished to complete his errand before Granger was up and moving about at the Estuary. "I will look for the damned animal myself, I suppose."

Minerva nodded and walked him to her bedroom door, opening it to allow him to pass into the hallway.



An hour later Snape was looking beneath the sofa in the ladies' sitting room at the top of the house when Dobby Apparated in, causing him to jump and smack his head on the sofa frame.

"What?" he demanded irritably.

"Dobby found Miss Stormy's Pygmy Puff, Professor Snape, sir," Dobby said nervously.

Snape stood, jerking his shoulders to readjust the hang of his robes. "Well, where is it?"

"If Sir will come with Dobby?"

Snape followed the house-elf down the staircase to a hallway lined with bedrooms. Dobby approached one of the doorways and had his hand on the door handle when Snape spoke. "Isn't this the floor on which the young ladies' rooms are located?"

Dobby nodded. "Yes, but this young lady is not here now, Professor, sir." The elf pushed the door open and indicated the other side of the room. "Fletcher is on the floor, on the other side of the bed."

"Very well," Snape said, entering the room. It was quite tidy and had a slight air of disuse. The reason for this became clear as he rounded the end of the bed and came upon the Pygmy Puff.

Fletcher, his shock of pink fur blending almost exactly with the surface upon which he crouched, was cosily snuggled up with Miss Granger's fluffy bunny slippers.

Merlin's beard! He was in Granger's bedroom. Snape looked nervously about until he realised that he was quite alone and that Miss Granger would not be dropping in on him; she was quarantined at the Estuary, wasn't she? He had all the leisure he needed to investigate her room — erm, to recover the blasted Pygmy Puff.

Despising himself for the weakness, Snape allowed his eyes to travel over every surface of the bedroom, seeking out her belongings, her tastes, and her interests. Here was a shelf of the Muggle paperback novels she read to put herself to sleep at night; here on the dressing table were cosmetics, bottles of fragrance, and paper tissues; after only a brief struggle, he dared to open the clothes cupboard and felt his stomach clench when a wave of her



scent washed over him. There, before him, was the flame-coloured faerie silk gown; against his will, he reached his hand out to caress the fabric of the dress she had worn the night he glimpsed his heart's desire. He did not know how much time he lost, standing in silence with his fingers tracing the texture of the material; when he came back to himself, he shoved the gown from him and flung the cupboard door closed with the air of a man barely escaping from a treacherous trap.

Backing quickly away from the cupboard, he felt his hip collide with a solid surface, and heard a thump as something heavy hit the carpet. With a muffled curse, he turned to find a large, heavy book on the floor, spread open as if someone had placed it face-down to save her place amongst the pages. He had bent to retrieve the book before he properly registered the title, *PRAVUS VENEVICUS* — it was the Dark Arts text he had seen Miss Granger carry out of Borgin and Burkes, that day he had seen her in the dubious company of Mr. Krum. He turned the book, thinking that the feel was wrong, for a Dark spellbook. Curious, he began to thumb through the pages.

*When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone bewep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,*



Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
 Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
 Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
 With what I most enjoy contented least;

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
 Haply I think on thee, — and then my state
 (Like to the lark at break of day arising
 From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate;
 For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings,
 That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

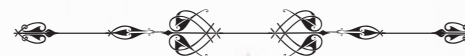
Snape snorted and flipped to the front of the book, finding on the title page, THE COMPLETE WORKS OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

The shameless wench! She had hoodwinked him, charming the cover of this massive book with the name of a notorious Dark Arts text. Why would she do it? What did she mean by it?

Brow furrowed in thought, he set the book carefully back on the desk from which he had displaced it, then bent to scoop up the Pygmy Puff. The impossible humming fur ball refused to let go of the slippers. Snape shook it, threatened it, and attempted to find its paws to pry them from the fuzzy fabric, all to no avail. With a final curse on all Pygmy Puffs, he picked up the slippers and bore the creature out of Miss Granger's room as if it were

a royal pet being borne upon a silken pillow.

Minerva McGonagall, perceiving the forbidding look upon Snape's face when he re-entered her bedroom to make use of the fireplace, prudently forbore to make a comment.



Hermione slipped into Stormy's room just as Bill finished reading aloud the last chapter of THE UNICORN PRINCESS. Stormy's heavy eyes had closed and she was dropping into a light slumber as Hermione crossed the room.

"I've just finished lunch," she whispered to Bill and Skye as they met her at the foot of the bed. "You should go eat now; it's shepherd's pie, and you know it's best when it's fresh."

Whispering their thanks, Bill and Skye headed out of the room and Hermione seated herself by the window and looked out over the garden. She had scarcely settled in the chair when the door opened and Professor Snape entered, carrying Fletcher, the Pygmy Puff and — could it be? — her house slippers. She felt the colour rush to her cheeks at the notion of him handling her bunny slippers, and her eyes flew to his face.

Snape felt his hopes crash when he entered the room to find himself confronted by Hermione. It wasn't yet time for her to be up! He should have had another clear hour before he was in danger of encountering her in the house. Bugger!

Could nothing go right on this thrice-damned day?

Good God, she had noticed the slippers.

He was standing now at the side of the bed, facing her, the Pygmy Puff held out from his body on the bunny slippers like some sort of bizarre offering.

"I have retrieved the Pygmy Puff," he said stiffly, keeping his eyes from her face.

"I see," Hermione murmured, stepping up to the other side of the bed, facing him across the bedclothes.

"I could not get the creature to release its hold on the bedroom slippers," he added, rather unnecessarily.

Stormy stirred and her eyes opened; immediately her face was wreathed in smiles. "Fletcher! Severus! You brought Fletcher!"

At the sound of her piping voice, the previously inert Pygmy Puff propelled itself out of Snape's hands onto the duvet and scampered into Stormy's welcoming arms.

Snape found himself momentarily captivated by the sight of the happy little girl in the bed, reunited with her chief comforter and confidante. He was unaware of Hermione moving around to his side of the bed until she spoke to him.

"Professor?"

He turned his head to look down his nose at her, forcing a frown onto his face while his hands unaccountably began to tremble.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"You're still holding my bunny slippers."

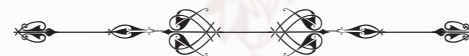
Snape thrust the slippers quickly into her hands.

"Thank you, sir," she murmured.

"Wear them in good health," Snape said inanely.

Hermione raised her face to his, her eyes crinkled with the irresistible smile she wore when she teased him about their differing opinions on the motivations of Jane Austen's characters. "Did you have any particular occasion in mind for me to wear them, sir?"

Snape felt a wave of compulsion rising within him, to seize her and punish her impertinence with the kisses she so plainly demanded. His eyes drank in her face and he knew she was reading his intent as clearly as if he had spoken the words aloud. With a monumental effort, he turned on his heel and escaped by the skin of his teeth.



Several days later, Snape received a visit from Lucius Malfoy.

Lucius had been amused when Snape had Flooed and requested his presence. "I have no objection, but how on earth am I to get there, dear boy? The place is under quarantine, after all."

"You can Apparate, of course," Snape said dismissively.

"Severus, the Ministry of Magic has placed wards to

prevent Apparition — they *are* under the impression that the child died of some plague or other.”

“Nonsense. I placed the wards, and I am telling you that you can Apparate in. Dammit, Lucius, I am surrounded by Gryffindors! You know they are prone to random acts of pointless heroics. If I don’t get some decent conversation I am going to commit mayhem. Get yourself over here.”

Lucius had been bowed into the blue salon by a house-elf, only to find Sophronia sitting blessedly alone. Visiting Snape became the last thing on his mind as he went forward with a genuine smile and pressed a kiss to her hand, which she swiftly withdrew.

“What brings you our way, Lucius?” Sophronia asked in her soft voice. “With the quarantine, we are not really receiving guests.”

Lucius spoke to the house-elf. “Would you show your mistress the things I brought for Miss Stormy?”

The elf fetched the basket, which had been left in the entrance hall, overflowing with succulent, tempting fresh fruits. Sophronia exclaimed happily, “She adores fruit, Lucius! How good of you! We have had such a time trying to get her to eat.”

“I remembered, from the weekend you spent at the Manor, that she was partial to strawberries and grapes. Those are from the Manor greenhouses. She will be welcome to the best we are able to produce until she is completely well again.”

“That is very good of you, Malfoy.”

Sirius Black entered the salon, approaching Lucius with the offer of a handshake. Lucius, conscious of Sophronia’s eye upon him, could do nothing else but allow Black the briefest of handshakes.

“It is the least I can do for Stormy,” he murmured.

Sophronia’s radiant smile of thanks was worth the indignity of being forced to shake the dog’s paw. He smiled back at her, holding her gaze, then bowed formally.

“I hope you will excuse me? I have come to see Severus.”

“Of course,” Sophronia said. “Nanny will show you up to his study.”

Lucius followed the elf out of the salon, but not before he saw Black place a possessive hand upon Sophronia’s shoulder.



Lucius sipped at the port in his glass and studied the chess board. “I don’t know why I persist in playing this game with you,” he complained, looking for a way out of Severus’ smugly proclaimed “check mate.”

“You are a closet masochist,” Snape said snidely, reaching for the bottle of port. “You know, this isn’t half bad.”

Lucius nodded absently. “Your father had a good nose for wine.”

Snape fingered his proboscis appreciatively. “My father had a good nose, full stop.”

Lucius looked up at him. “You’re drunk.”

“Right in one,” Snape agreed with him, taking another drink from his glass of port. “I am bored out of my mind and surrounded by a gaggle of women and a pride of Gryffindors — you would be drunk, too.”

“Is there any sign that Alverard has taken the bait?”

Snape shrugged. “None. But the Aurors have not been able to find them; we’re thinking that their hidey hole might be under the Fidelius Charm. They poisoned Stormy intending to kill her; now they think they’ve accomplished their aim. Eventually they will strike again or try to contact me. All I can do is wait and keep my family under constant surveillance.”

“What about Mademoiselle? Why have you not brought her here for safekeeping?”

Snape shifted with apparent discomfort at the question. “Fleur is being watched by a team of Order members and Aurors — has Draco not mentioned it to you? He is the head of her protection detail.”

Lucius made a moue of disgust. “Draco has still not forgiven me for objecting to his choice of wife; he does not keep me informed of his movements.”

Snape narrowed his eyes. “He loves her, Lucius. No



matter how big a fool you may think him, he loves her. You must respect that.”

Lucius took the bottle of port and put it out of Snape’s reach. “You really *have* had enough,” he said.



It was Gala Night at the Ministry, and the wizarding folk were out in droves. The ladies from Grimmauld Place arrived early on, escorted by the young men of Phoenix House. Minerva McGonagall had invited Fleur to accompany their party, but the Frenchwoman had steadfastly refused.

“It would be unseemly for me to attend parties with my fiancé’s family in mourning for little Stormy,” she insisted. Her point had been inarguable, and it had been necessary for the protective detail to abandon their plans to follow her to the Gala. Draco, whose previous engagement was unbreakable, had prevailed upon Kingsley Shacklebolt to cover for him that night.

“You already *have* a girl,” Kingsley had objected jokingly. “*Some* of us are still working on that little problem — aren’t we, Remus?”

Lupin had looked up in a pained sort of way and agreed with Kingsley.

“I owe it to a mate — I have to be there,” Draco had explained.



"I'm just taking the mickey, mate — I'll cover Snape's fiancée for you."

Now Draco looked around the room, seeking out his marks. He and Pansy had worked it out, without explaining it to Neville. Luna had listened to one of their planning sessions and said, "Neville will do what you want him to do just naturally — but if you tell him ahead of time, he won't be able to bring it off."

Draco had beamed at Luna, drawing her into his lap right in front of Pansy. "That's why I love you, Luna — you have the heart of a child and the wiles of a Slytherin."

Luna had leaned in greedily for the kiss which followed, and Pansy had flounced away, saying, "Oh, get a room!" — but with an indulgent smile on her face. She didn't begrudge Draco his happiness, even if it was with that distinctly dotty Lovegood girl. Draco had pushed her into Neville's arms, and that was the best thing that had ever happened to Pansy.

Now Draco spotted their prey, standing with acquaintances and sipping at champagne cocktails. He nodded once to Pansy and grasped Neville's arm, pulling him along whilst Luna hovered in the background, ready with her wand if things should get out of hand.

"...gave me up for *that*?"

Pansy's shriek brought her parents to abrupt attention,

the two of them moving forward immediately as they saw their daughter standing toe-to-toe with Draco Malfoy.

"...and you're as dull as ditchwater," Draco was saying coldly as the Parkinsons arrived on the scene.

"Oh, I say, Draco," Mr. Parkinson said, reaching out to touch Draco on the shoulder.

"You always have dirt under your fingernails and you can't talk about anything but shrubbery — who would want to marry you?" Draco taunted a red-faced Pansy.

Neville had stood by, listening to Draco and Pansy carp at one another; they had been friends for a long time, and Neville had grown accustomed to their sniping. This, however, was over the line. *No one* spoke to his Pansy that way.

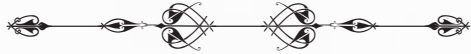
Draco went down heavily when Neville clumsily, but doggedly, punched him in the jaw. "I want to marry her, you great *prat*!" Neville shouted. "And don't you *ever* talk that way to her again, Malfoy. I don't care if you *are* my mate!"

Luna moved in promptly with her wand, ready with her healing spell and the pot of bruise remover supplied by the Weasley twins; Harry and Seamus shooed the on-lookers back onto the dance floor, lessening the audience around the Parkinsons and their daughter's swains.

Pansy launched herself at Neville, and he dutifully caught her, crushing her to him protectively as he glared at the fallen — but smirking — Draco. Pansy then grabbed

his hand, and turned to face her parents.

“Mummy, Daddy, I want for you to meet Neville.”



Alverard looked around the room at the milling group of mercenaries he had been able to scrape together, thinking they were a sad lot. He glanced at Mulciber and Macnair, who were standing at the back of the room; they shrugged. Alverard nodded; he knew the gold they were offering as inducement was not nearly enough to tempt better soldiers. These were the best they could do, for now.

He passed out the wizarding photo of Snape and Fleur which had embellished the newspaper announcement of their engagement. “This is Snape’s betrothed. We don’t know where *he* is, but the rest of his family are under quarantine in Hampshire. We think that if he is around, nothing will pull him out of hiding faster than an attack on his woman.” He indicated the six men nearest to him. “You six will make a move on the woman tomorrow. There is a possibility that she is being watched by Snape’s Order friends, so be prepared for fighting. Any questions?”

There were no questions. No one in their right mind ever questioned Alverard.

He looked to the remainder of the group. “You lot report back here first thing in the morning for further



instructions.”

The mercenaries filed out and Mulciber closed the door behind them, while Macnair stepped up to Alverard. “What are you planning?” he demanded, recognizing the tightly wound quality of the Interrogator’s posture.

“Get a good night’s sleep, Death Eaters. While the lackeys make a move on the fiancée, the rest of us will hit the Estuary. Three women alone with a bunch of house-elves? We’ll kill one of the sisters and kidnap the mother and the other sister; Snape will be more inclined to negotiate if we have hostages.”

Mulciber shoved Macnair aside. “But what if Snape is there, Alverard? What then? He’s outfoxed us before.”

Alverard smiled. “Then we will have to kill them all.”



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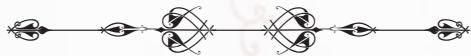
DRACO MALFOY lounged against a lamppost, handily Disillusioned to escape the notice of passers-by on the street, and kept watch over the town home of the Delacour family. Severus Snape had been a friend of Draco’s family since long before Draco had been born; he had been a helpful mentor to Draco at Hogwarts, subtly steering Draco into the path of the Light as



Draco's questions regarding his father's views and methods had begun to disturb the boy. Draco was aware that Professor Snape had even spoken to Lucius Malfoy in support of Draco's decision to marry Luna.

Surrounded by Gryffindors, it was difficult not to let some of their traits rub off on one; never let it be said that the inmates of Slytherin House did not also have standards of loyalty and support of one another in times of need! No, when Professor McGonagall had approached Draco with Snape's request that Draco be in charge of protection for Fleur Delacour, Draco had immediately stepped up and accepted the commission. Whilst renegade Death Eaters were roaming about, one could not be too careful.

Therefore, it was with terrific swiftness that Draco responded when he saw the unmistakable flashes of spells being cast from within the Delacour house; he sent his eagle Patronus with a message for Tonks, before hurtling through the front door and racing into the sitting room.



Hermione shook her head and rubbed her face, struggling to clear the fog from her mind and the sleep from her eyes. Now that her services as night nurse were no longer required, she was struggling to reacquaint herself with sleeping at night and being awake during the day. For Stormy was free



of danger now, no longer having to ingest the potion to fortify her heart, and she was swiftly regaining her strength and stamina. She did not require constant watching as she slept. The child had been moved back to her nursery, and Nanny now slept in an adjacent room, with the door ajar.

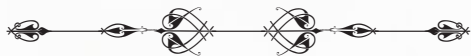
Stifling a yawn, Hermione stood and crossed to her closet, pulling out jeans and a tee-shirt. The "quarantine" had been ongoing now for more than a week. If things had continued with Professor Snape as they had been after Stormy awoke, the easy camaraderie of reading together, talking about everything under the sun, and long, wandering walks all over the Estuary grounds, she would no doubt have been as happy as Skye and Shadow were with the course of events. She, however, had not had a proper conversation with the professor since the night he had walked out of Stormy's room with her heart in his hands. Time was ticking and she was unable to move her plans along at all while confined to the Estuary with three pairs of happy lovers, an adoring eight-year-old, and an elusive Potions master whose ability to make himself scarce was swiftly beginning to wear upon her nerves.

Hermione tugged the tee-shirt into place and slid her feet into her bunny slippers before sitting at the writing desk and making an effort to ingest the tea and toast provided by Nanny. The doyenne of the Estuary nursery had



swiftly adopted Hermione as one of her own nurselings — for how could she fail to love someone who so obviously doted upon Miss Stormy? — and proceeded to scold, bully, and cajole her as if her name was Snape. Nanny was not above drilling Hermione with questions when she delivered the tray, either; over time, she had induced Hermione to speak of her home, her parents, her education, her opinion of Professor Snape as a teacher, and her matrimonial prospects. It was quite apparent to Hermione that Nanny was a force to be reckoned with within the Snape family, seeming to have liberties far beyond the boundaries of other house-elves Hermione had known.

Hermione picked up her quill and set about to write a letter to Harry, in answer to his latest scribbled note. They were not allowed to send owls, or to use the Floo, but the professor was in daily contact with Minerva McGonagall, and communications were passed on in that way. Hermione was munching a piece of toast and jotting a cheerful note for Harry to share with Ginny when she became aware of a commotion in the Estuary Entrance Hall.



Fleur was in a panic. Severus had told her that she was to be watched and protected while he was unable to be with her, and his obvious caring and concern had made her feel



cherished and proud. She had not, however, expected to actually *need* the protection.

She had been sitting in her mother's parlour, sharing a cup of morning tea with Percy Weasley, who had dropped by for his daily visit to exchange information regarding the state of affairs at the Estuary. She was in the act of passing a plate of homemade macarons to Percy when there had been a shout and the door from the hallway had exploded inward, blasted open with a spell rather than opened with the door handle. A group of men, their faces obscured by eerily familiar masks, had burst into the room, wands drawn, and begun shooting spells and shouting instructions. The two men in the lead each had a house-elf firmly attached to one leg as the elves attempted to defend their family.

Percy Weasley had risen from the sofa upon which he sat, grasping Fleur's arm and unceremoniously thrusting her to the floor, and pulled his wand with an impressive flourish, bringing down the two men in the lead with cries of "*Petrificus Totalus!*" Fleur, from her vantage point at Percy's feet, was able to observe the fierce determination the young man displayed as he faced the inexplicable attack. Vaguely, she remembered that this Weasley brother had been awarded an Order of Merlin, Third Class, for his heroic deeds in the battles against the Dark Lord; it seemed to be something of a family trait, after all.



There was a further scramble of motion in the doorway as Draco Malfoy burst into the room, leaping over the bodies of the downed assailants and catching two others from behind with Stunning Spells. The fifth intruder, perceiving himself to be the only one of his confederates left standing, attempted to Disapparate, but was foiled by the Anti-Disapparition Jinx which had activated the moment the ward alarms had been tripped. Nymphadora Tonks, stepping through the ruined door into the sitting room, brought the last brigand down with a lazy flick of her wand, swiftly turning then to each of the attackers and shooting ropes from her wand to bind them.

"Everyone all right?" Tonks inquired cheerfully, nudging one of the attackers with the toe of her trainer.

Percy bent to assist Fleur to a standing position. "Are you all right, Fleur?" he inquired, earnestly solicitous.

Fleur dusted herself with her hands, smoothing her rumpled robes in the process. "What was that?" she demanded, a querulous note in her voice.

The fireplace at the far end of the room flared with green flames and Severus Snape's face appeared there. "Fleur?" he called. "What happened?"

Draco crossed the room to kneel and speak to Snape. "We just had an attack here, Professor. Five men, all in Death Eater masks. Percy Weasley was here and he helped



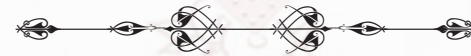
to fight them off. Tonks has arrived and we've taken all five into custody; no one is hurt."

Fleur knelt beside Draco. "Severus, you must come instantly!" she cried. "Who are these men? I am afraid!"

Snape surveyed Fleur dispassionately. "You know I am under quarantine and unable to come there now, Fleur," he said in a reasonable tone. "Draco, please ask a house-elf to call Madam Delacour to her daughter's assistance."

From Snape's side of the conversation came additional voices. "I apologise, but I must attend to matters here. I will see you as soon as I can, Fleur."

And in spite of her shout of rage, he was gone.



No one noticed the sentry left near the back entrance to the Delacour house as he fled the scene to make his report to Alverard.



A short time earlier, the Estuary door bell had chimed and a house-elf went to answer the door. Lucius Malfoy spoke in his imperious tones, asking for Miss Stormy.

"Lorry will see if Mistress is receiving guests," the elf answered. "Will Sir come in?"

"I will wait here," Lucius replied.



Descending the three very shallow steps, which led down from the great oaken door of the Estuary, Lucius crossed the apex of the circular gravelled drive, removing an item from the pocket of his silvery robes. He knew that the likelihood of his winning Sophronia at this late date were so miniscule as to be nonexistent. Not only did Sirius Black possess the unfair advantage of having shared a teenage romance with her, but he and Sophronia had been living for days beneath the same roof. How could Lucius hope to compete in such inequitable circumstances? And yet he found himself patently unable to stop trying. He had been able to buy everything he wanted for all of his life, but this one thing, this woman who could undoubtedly make him happy in ways of which he had only dreamt, was beyond his reach. Even in his knowledge of her unattainability, he found himself returning here repeatedly, in the hopes of receiving one kind look, or one more view of the roguish dimple, which appeared when she laughed.

One sure way to make his visits acceptable to Sophronia was to tie them to Stormy's convalescence. The exasperating child had recovered from her near-death experience much too quickly to suit Lucius; he was running out of excuses to visit based on Stormy's needs. Yet he had in his possession one last bribe to fate: a Princess Playhouse.

Placing the rectangle of pink fabric on the grass of the

verge of the lawn, he removed his wand and spoke the incantation specified by the Playhouse manufacturers. It instantly expanded, assuming the shape of a small tent. In the manner of wizarding tents, this one was much larger on the inside than it was on the outside. However, as this was a child's plaything, the inside was sized to a child, and the interior was as colourful and fanciful as the most whimsical little girl could demand. It was outrageously dear, but well worth the expense if it gave him one more excuse to call upon Sophronia.

"Hi, Mr. Malfoy!"

Lucius turned to see Stormy emerging from the interior of the house, leaving the door open behind her; the reason for this became apparent as Black, and then the two Weasley brothers, followed Stormy out into the morning sunlight.

"Good morning, Stormy," Lucius responded, at his most charming. "Come see what I have brought for you."

The child was wearing a pink dress covered by a white pinafore; from out of the pocket of the overdress, part of a pink Pygmy Puff peeked. She skipped across the drive onto the verge, beneath the shade of one of the trees which were scattered over the front lawn of the Estuary.

"It looks like a pink tent," Stormy said, looking down at her gift.

"Yes, but what does it look like on the *inside*?" Lucius responded in a wondering tone.

"May I see?" The child fairly radiated curiosity.

"Certainly you may," Lucius responded.

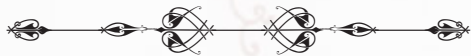
Stormy dropped to her knees and crawled into the tent; from within, her exclamations of delight were clearly audible.

"You may as well give up," Black murmured with false concern as he joined Lucius beside the tent.

Lucius shot Black a look of malevolent dislike. "I will continue, as always, to do precisely as I please."

Then the Weasley boys joined them, the two of them vying with one another for the title of "tallest, reddest-haired, with most freckles," and the conversation became general.

This is how Alverard and his fifteen comrades found them when they materialised apparently out of the air, each of them removing their Disillusionment Spells at Alverard's command, and watching the four men form a defensive semi-circle about the anomalous pink tent at their feet.



Snape withdrew his head from the fireplace, breaking the Floo connection with Fleur, and turned to glare at Nanny.

"Can you not see that I am speaking with someone?"

As he spoke, a tremor of sensation ran down his spine, just as had happened moments before, when the ward



alarms at the Delacour home were breached.

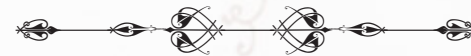
"That Mr. Lucius Malfoy is calling, Master Severus. Nanny thought you would want to know," the house-elf replied evenly.

"Lucius just Apparated in?" he repeated to her.

"Yes, he did, a few moments ago, Master Severus. He is asking for Miss Stormy, but Mistress has gone down to receive him."

Snape frowned as he stood, checking to make sure his wand was in its place, up his right sleeve. "Come to the door with me, Nanny; there is something amiss and I may need you." He turned on the spot and felt his attempt at Disapparition bump against the solid wall of the Anti-Disapparition Jinx, which was only activated by the wards being contravened.

"Come!" he shouted to the house-elf, noting the panic in her tennis ball-sized eyes as he sprinted through his bedroom and into the corridor.



Hermione cocked her head as she heard raised voices in the hall; what on earth was wrong now? Placing her piece of toast neatly back on its plate, she dropped her quill and crossed the floor to open the door, stepping out into the hallway and moving to peer over the banis-



ter into the Entrance Hall, below. To her puzzlement, she saw Sophronia, Skye, and Shadow crowding the doorway, while Professor Snape pushed his way through them, bellowing at them to, "Stay back!"

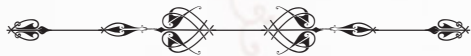
Her heart leaping into her throat at this unprecedented behaviour, Hermione pulled her wand and pelted down the staircase to join the Snape women in the hall.



Lucius immediately went into battle mode as the forms of the interlopers became distinct. Coming up the left side of the drive were a half-dozen men, led by none other than Mulciber; on the right side of the drive came Alverard, leading another group of comparable size.

"Death Eaters?" Black snapped, sparing a momentary glance at Lucius.

"Yes," Lucius said, and began to fire curses with deadly accuracy.



Unaware of the drama taking place outside of her Princess Playhouse, Stormy was confused by the onset of shouting and other perplexing noises filtering in from outside. For a moment, when Fletcher flung himself out of her pocket and scampered out the tent flap, veering off



to one side, she was simply dumbfounded. Soon, however, she shouted, "Fletcher, come back!" and darted out in pursuit of him, unwittingly running directly towards the oncoming phalanx of Mulciber's men.



Snape reached the Entrance Hall with Nanny on his heels, to find Sophronia and the girls standing in the doorway with looks of horror on their faces. Pushing past them, he could see Lucius, Black, and the Weasleys standing in a defensive posture with their wands drawn.

"Stay back!" he shouted to the women as he erupted from the house. He had a fast impression of two groups of fighters advancing up either side of the drive before he saw the flash of pink fur dashing towards the group on his left; with a sick lurch of horror, he saw Stormy clamber out of an incongruous pink tent and hie after her pet, heedless of the death awaiting her on the drive.

Summoning speed he did not know he possessed, Snape ran after Stormy, shooting non-verbal Disarming and Stunning Spells at the attackers as he advanced. From behind him he heard a shout; after the first two words, he knew the voice belonged to Alverard.

"It's Snape! *Do not kill him!* I want him to see this! Ten extra Galleons to each man who brings down one of these fools!"



With the hyper-focus born of battle situations, Snape took careful aim and methodically threw Full Body Binds on the two men aiming for Stormy. When Stormy saw the two men fall, she stopped dead in her tracks, suddenly aware that she was surrounded by danger. Reaching her side, Snape shoved her behind him, parrying curses aimed at them with sure, measured movements.

“Stormy! Get into the house NOW!” he bellowed at her.

“But *Fletcher!*” Stormy cried in anguish.

As he turned his head to speak a sharp reprimand to her, he felt the blast of magic, sent his way by Mulciber, he was quite sure, which hit his extended wand arm and shattered it from the elbow down. He felt the agony as blood and bits of flesh splattered his clothing and the gravel at his feet, yet he was bending to retrieve his wand from the ground with his right hand when he was hit by the Leg Locker Curse which knocked him off his feet.

With a cry of pure terror, Stormy ran from her fallen brother, bolting back to the perceived safety of the pink tent. As Snape hit the ground with a sickening crunch of his already-ruined left arm, he felt a wave of faintness pass over him. He watched, as if time had slowed to a crawl, as Sophronia darted out of the house, her eyes fixed on her defenceless child. In a moment that felt like rank cowardice, Snape closed his eyes so as not to see the annihilation

of his stepmother and his baby sister.



Lucius Malfoy felt his lip curling in aristocratic disdain as he looked upon Alverard’s pathetic attempt to punish Severus Snape. The Gryffindors who had lately been making Severus so unhappy by their presence in his house were certainly of use, now. The younger Weasley boy stood to Lucius’ left, efficiently delivering and parrying spells, just as he had done at the side of Harry Potter; Black and the older Weasley boy were engaging the group to Lucius’ right. Black carried on with too much taunting talk, but both he and Bill Weasley were quite proficient.

All was going well until he became aware of Severus’ voice behind him — good, they needed another wand! — but his swift look over his shoulder showed Severus falling, his wand-arm destroyed, and Sophronia’s daughter sprinting back towards the tent. Lucius began to fall back, meaning to cover his fallen friend — but then Sophronia was in the middle of it all, obviously thinking of nothing but that wretched child. Hearing her mother’s voice, Stormy changed her course and ran into her mother’s arms; Sophronia promptly forced the child to the gravel and covered her with her body, never thinking to pull her wand and cast a protective spell. Sophronia had likely never used a defen-

sive spell since she left her last Defence Against the Dark Arts class, more than twenty years ago.

Now Lucius planted himself firmly in front of Sophronia and Stormy, fiercely fighting to keep the blackguards off of Severus whilst keeping Sophronia safe as well. "Sophronia, *take the child and get into the house!*" he shouted.

Cowering in abject terror, Sophronia seemed to be frozen in her protective attitude over the child; she did not appear to hear the words Lucius addressed to her.

"Black!" Lucius roared. "Sirius!"

Looking back over his shoulder with a manic light in his eye, Sirius paled at the sight of his beloved crouching on the ground behind Malfoy, her body curved to protect a gibbering Stormy.

"Get them into the house!" Lucius shouted and Sirius back-pedalled swiftly to reach the females.

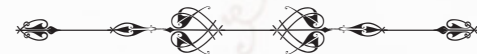
Lucius directed his attention then back to Mulciber and the four men still standing with him; they had fanned out a bit over the drive to cover the smaller fighting group of Order members more completely. With no thought in his mind save to bring this farce to an end, Lucius sent non-verbal Killing Curses, one right after the other, and took down the assailants closest to Severus.

From the next man in the group, whose eyes were dilated with fear as Lucius trained his wand upon him, there came a

scream of, "It's Malfoy! He's using the Unforgiveables!"



Snape lay upon the gravel, blood from his arm continuing to flow, staining the drive red as it pooled beneath his body, and he watched the drama unfold with the curious detachment available only to those whose lifeblood is pumping out of their bodies. Unbelievably, Lucius had fallen back in time to lay down a rash of protective spells to keep Sophronia and Stormy safe; now, Black was moving back as well, covered by Bill Weasley. As Snape watched, he could see the stance of Lucius' body change, becoming more purposeful; Snape was not surprised to see the twin jets of green light which streamed from Lucius' wand. Though he could not see them fall, he heard the bodies, one after the other, hit the ground behind him. There was a terrified screech, also from behind him, containing the word "Unforgiveables."



At that moment, Sophronia rose to her feet, galvanised by Black's encouragement to run back into the house. The sudden, seemingly aggressive movement drew Mulciber's attention as he was aiming at Lucius; in his distraction, the curse went wide and a jet of green light was streaking

at Sophronia, carrying with it the unmistakeable sound of a heavy object moving in her direction at great speed.

Without pausing to think, Lucius obeyed the instinct to protect her, and he lunged to his left, taking with his own body the Killing Curse, which would have claimed Sophronia's life. His last thought, before he fell lifelessly at her feet, was, *Live well, my love.*

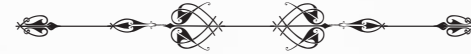


Seeing Lucius take the curse that was meant for her, Sophronia knelt again upon the gravel, reaching with desperate hope to revive him. She had neither witnessed, nor fought in a battle; she did not understand the significance of the colour and sound of the spell that had knocked Lucius to the ground. Stormy clutched at the back of her mother's robes, finally beyond sobs in the midst of the chaos.

Skye and Shadow, clinging to one another in the shelter of the doorway, watched as everyone they loved stood against the men who came up the drive hurling unfriendly spells. Ignoring the commands and pleas of Nanny, who strove to move them back from the doorway, the girls cried out with one voice as first, Lucius Malfoy fell, then as their mama went to her knees as well. Thinking only that Sophronia had been injured, the girls ran down the shallow steps onto the drive, kneeling on either side of



their mother, their anxious hands feeling up and down her torso, searching for the wound which had felled her.



Hermione's feet, clad in the ludicrous slippers, hit the tile of the Entrance Hall just as Shadow and Skye erupted onto the drive. Gaining the doorway, she paused mere seconds to assess the situation.

To the right, a group of men were being held at bay by Bill and Sirius; on the left, a smaller group of men were battling Ron. Here and there she could see where members of the opposition group had fallen; directly before her, she saw an unmoving Lucius Malfoy, with all of the Snape women crouched beside him. Her frantic eyes swept the action again, seeking out the one whose wand would single-handedly even the odds against the remaining ten attackers who dared to invade his home, but he was not there.

Nanny was by her side and seemed to know her thoughts.

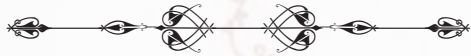
"There!" the house-elf shouted, pointing to the left, to a frighteningly still figure sprawled in a puddle of blackish fluid which Hermione all too easily recognised as blood.

Hermione ran directly for Snape's body, coming to a stop between him and the masked men, her aggressive attitude resembling nothing so much as a lioness protecting her young.



She could see Bill and Ron pulling back now, tightening their defences around the fallen and the vulnerable, the immediate presence of their women bringing a blazing intensity to their efforts to fight off the Death Eaters and their compatriots. Reaching for Snape's ebony wand, which lay inches from what remained of his left hand, Hermione straightened, shouting, "*Protego!*" She felt the power of the Shield Charm gush simultaneously from both wands and she struggled to focus the power, bringing it lower and lower until it hovered at her knees and spread over Snape's body like a shimmering blanket.

Reaching within herself for the stores of her magical energy, Hermione directed her considerable skill to maintaining the protective shield over the bleeding body of Severus Snape, trusting in Ron to protect her, and praying that it would end soon, before it was too late for the wizard at her feet.

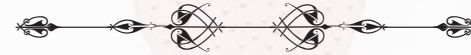


Though Hermione was unaware of it, Nanny followed directly behind her as she ran across the drive, the house-elf diverging from Hermione's path to reach Stormy. Master Severus had said that he might have need of her, and Nanny chose to interpret those words as permission to remove the child from danger. Using the magic she was



permitted as the child's nurse, Nanny detached Stormy's hold on her mother's robes and levitated her directly back into the house, pausing only to say, "Leave Mr. Malfoy! He is dead, Mistress! Come into the house — come now!"

Skye and Shadow, having seen the truth of Nanny's words in the unmoving form of Lucius Malfoy, frantically urged Sophronia to retreat, but Sophronia continued to shake the silvery robes and to call for Lucius to open his eyes and to speak to her.



Macnair strained to hear what was going forward at the house, but the flashes of light which he could see through the trees did not make sense; if a dozen armed men attacked a bunch of women, why would there be so many curses and hexes flying through the air?

Signalling to the two recruits under his command to hold their positions on the perimeter, he moved forward through the trees, keeping to the middle of the lawn bisecting the circular drive. Half-way to the house, he saw Alverard and Mulciber falling back, accompanied by perhaps six of the mercenaries they had hired to fight, who were continuing to fire haphazardly in the direction of the house. Breaking into a run, he gained their position.

"What's happened?" he panted, coming to stop between



Alverard and Mulciber, who alternated sending Stunning Spells flying towards the Order members.

“The Order of the Phoenix happened!” Mulciber spat, glaring at Alverard. “Not only Snape, but Malfoy, too, and God knows how many Weasleys. They’ve even got that Mudblood bint standing over Snape’s body and fighting as if she thinks she can save his worthless arse.”

Macnair felt the sour taste of defeat rise in his throat like bile. “What are we going to do?”

Alverard emitted a short laugh. “We’re going to fight, you fools! Kill them all!”

Mulciber spat on the ground. “I’ve had just about enough of you and your stupid plans, Alverard. Where’s the gold we came after? This isn’t about killing — it’s about getting gold!”

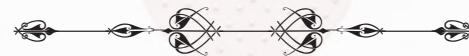
The mercenaries gathered around the three former Death Eaters began to back away, thinking to themselves that this was a lost cause and not worth the bother. Certainly no gold seemed to be forthcoming for their efforts. They began to slowly melt into the trees, unnoticed by the trio who were snarling at one another like rabid dogs.

The deserters did not make it very far, however. There were loud popping sounds from every direction, and armed persons began to Apparate in, some wearing the distinctive robes of the Auror Department. The two

remaining perimeter guards were being frog-marched forward, each one held on either side by grim-faced captors. One deserter, blanching visibly, threw his wand down and raised his hands in surrender, shouting to his fellows, “It’s Harry-Bloody-Potter, lads! Pack it in!”

Hearing this shout, Alverard interrupted Mulciber’s tirade. “Don’t you want revenge on Snape? What kind of cowards are you? Fight or I’ll kill you myself!” he snarled.

And with one accord, Mulciber and Macnair turned their wands on Alverard and shouted, “*Avada Kedavra!*”



Snape watched as first Hermione, then Nanny, sprinted out of the house; by his reckoning, only three members of his household had failed to spill out of the house, making themselves targets for Alverard and company. The three who remained in the house were all house-elves; it briefly crossed his mind that it was a pity he could not offer them a pay-rise for this show of good sense.

He saw Nanny forcibly remove Stormy from the scene and felt a mild gratification; dimly, he knew he ought to feel relieved, but such emotion required far too much energy from a man trembling on the cusp of crossing the Veil to the Other Side. Now Hermione was hurdling his body and landing squarely on her bunny-slipper clad feet.

He could feel her hand upon his wand as if it were upon his own flesh, and felt some regret that he was too far gone to appreciate the sensation properly. The Shield Charm she cast felt like the softest and warmest of blankets; inconsequentially, he thought it was a shame that she could not join him for a cuddle beneath the comfort of the mantle. Now she was crouched by his head, the slippers at his eye level, and she was murmuring, "*Finite Incantatem.*" He was able to move again, and to speak.

"I am growing inordinately fond of those slippers, but please don't let them be the last thing I see before I die."

SNAPE FLOATED up from the depths, drawn by the irresistible scent of strawberries and the essence of almonds. He felt that the anvil resting between his eyebrows and nailing his skull to the surface behind his head was a bit of overkill, though. One of his usual migraines would have been enough to incapacitate him sufficiently, surely? What was this over-achieving agony currently being visited upon him? Involuntarily, he went to brush

the offending iron block from his brow, only to be jarred by a wave of pain that radiated from his fingertips to his collarbone.

He fell back into the abyss.



Hermione felt the movement beneath her fingertips and she raised her head from the pillow of her arms. Healer Howser, seated across the bed from her, met her eyes with a smile.

"Did he move?" she asked.

"Almost woke up," the Healer agreed.

Hermione looked at the face resting on the pillow, its pallor almost a match for the white of the pristine bed sheet, and dared to stroke the inky black hair back from his forehead. Being careful not to touch his left arm, which was encased in bandages to the tips of his long, elegant fingers, she smoothed the sheet with a tender hand.

"His arm will heal," she stated, looking at this appendage with enough determination to frighten it into doing just that.

Healer Howser stood, reaching upwards with his arms and stretching the kinks from his back. "There is a good chance that he will recover full function of the arm, providing he does his exercises and follows the aftercare instructions."

Walking across the sterile room, the Healer raised the shade covering the window and the pale sunlight filled the room with a golden glow.

Healer Howser turned from the window, momentarily taken aback by the image of the girl by the bed. She wore a tee-shirt which proclaimed her to be "Head Girl" and a pair of faded denims; on her feet were a ludicrous pair of slippers, shaped like fluffy pink bunnies. Yet it was her face which arrested him where he stood. In the spill of morning light, her skin appeared radiant; her dark eyes shone as they rested upon the face of the patient in the bed, and her tangle of dark curls was like a nimbus of glory about her head.

He was a lucky bloke, this unpleasant git of a Potions professor, the Healer reflected.

"I can see you love him a lot," Howser said softly. "When is the happy day?"

The door to the room, which had been pushed open silently, was now thrust with full force so that it hit the wall with a loud bang which caused Hermione and the Healer to jump, and caused the patient in the bed to toss his head and groan.

"*She is not his fiancée!*" Fleur Delacour exclaimed, anger making her accent more pronounced. "She is not *anyone* of importance!" Fleur swept into the room in a rush of heavy French perfume, stopping just short of laying hands upon Hermione to shove her from the bedside. "I am his affianced wife. You will make your report to me, if you please."

Sophronia Snape, her face pale and haggard, followed Fleur into the hospital room, with Sirius, Skye, and Shadow in her wake.

"Hermione saved Severus' life, Fleur. She cast a protective spell so that the attackers could not further harm him, once he was down, and she was the one who stopped the bleeding before we moved him to St. Mungo's. Without her quick thinking, Severus would have lost his arm—or bled to death." Sophronia walked across the room and enfolded Hermione into her arms as if she were one of her own daughters. "She sat up night after night with Stormy, nursing her back to health. I don't know where this family would be, without Hermione." Stepping to one side, so that Hermione stood within the circle of her arm, Sophronia looked into Fleur's face and spoke in a tone of gentle reproof. "Hermione is not Severus' fiancée, no, but she is a part of this family, and we will all treat her with the respect due to her."

Flustered by the usually placid Sophronia's defence of Hermione, Fleur hunched an unfriendly shoulder. "I am sure we are all thankful for Miss Granger's assistance," Fleur allowed. "However, *I* am here, now, and I will see to my fiancé."

Hermione's chin tilted dangerously as she held the pale blue eyes of the Veela. "Well, I suppose this is a non-infectious illness," she murmured before brushing past Fleur and walking out of the room.

In the hallway, Ron stood with Harry, as if they had been waiting for her.

“C’mere,” Harry said, pulling Hermione into a long, fraternal hug. “We’re going to take you home, now.”

And without further ado, her two best friends Disapparated her to number twelve, Grimmauld Place.



He surfaced again; her scent was not so strong this time, seeming to hover on the bedclothes pulled up to his chest rather than surrounding him as it had done before, but he could still feel the weight of her upper body resting on the mattress at his side. From a great distance, he had heard her speaking to him, much as she had spoken to Stormy in the depths of her illness. He remembered, now, the battle and his injury, which accounted for the torment on the left side of his body. A rush of grief swept over him; Lucius was dead.

But she was not dead.

His voice, unused for more than twenty-four hours, came out as a rasp.

“I hope you had the opportunity to change your footwear before you brought me here.”

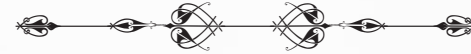
To his horror, the wrong voice responded.

“Severus?”

The mattress shifted as she moved, and her cloying perfume washed over him in a nausea-inducing cloud.



“Basin!” he croaked, but she was too slow — he promptly retched all over them both.



Hermione used the Floo in Professor McGonagall’s bedroom to go to the Estuary and retrieve her belongings. After a bath and a long nap, she felt up to the task of packing away her things. It seemed rather odd to say, “Professor Severus Snape’s bedroom,” as she tossed the Floo powder, but it was the only fireplace at the Estuary hooked up to the Floo Network — and she knew he wasn’t going to be there, anyway.

Stepping down from the hearth, she could not prevent herself from standing on the rug and looking eagerly about the room. Many of the furnishings appeared to have been placed there by earlier residents; she could scarcely imagine the professor choosing those hunting prints to grace his walls, even if the participants *were* pursuing a Kneazle from the backs of their magically-enhanced thoroughbred horses. She was drawn by the framed certificates showing his N.E.W.T.s scores and his Diploma of Mastery in Potions.

Through a darkened doorway she could see his private study, the room into which he had disappeared to avoid her for the last two weeks. Resisting the temptation to enter, she contented herself with picking up the leather-



bound book from his bedside table to read the title: *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY*. A lump rose in her throat as she realised that he had continued reading the book she had begun to read after *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*, even though he had stopped discussing their shared reading with her.

Forcing herself to replace the book on the table, Hermione padded over to the door, where her progress was arrested by the sight of his robes, hanging on a hook. Without compunction, she pulled the robes from the hook and slipped them on over her clothes, remembering when she had worn them to protect herself from the cold in the dark of the cabin. On that occasion, she had worn no other article of clothing, save for his coat. Gathering the fabric in both fists, she lifted them to her face, breathing deeply of his musky scent.

With a regretful sigh, she removed the robes again, hanging them back upon the hook before making her way out of Snape's room, and traversing the corridors to come to the room which had been hers for over a fortnight.

She had no idea that her movements had been closely watched from the darkened study.

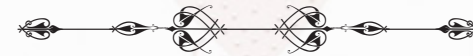
It did not take her long to pack her things, though she left behind the copy of *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY* she had been reading; the book belonged to the Estuary library, along with its twin, currently residing in the professor's bedroom.

Crookshanks' basket, however, was empty, and her calls to him went unanswered. At last, she called for Nanny.

"Nanny does not know where Miss Hermione's cat is," the house-elf told her truthfully.

"When he turns up, Nanny, will you Floo me, please, so that I may come and get him?"

The house-elf readily agreed and Hermione made her way back to the professor's bedroom to Floo back to Grimmauld Place, sure that nothing save the presence of Nanny had prevented her from burying her face one last time in the black robes hanging innocuously by the door.



Fleur was back at the hospital the next morning, in spite of the distinct lack of encouragement she had received from one and all to be there. Snape had just finished clumsily feeding himself, with his unskilled right hand, the porridge he was permitted for breakfast. He was unshaved and unwashed, his arm was a constant torment, and he was not wishful to receive visitors.

However, she brought with her a powerful inducement — she carried a copy of the *DAILY PROPHET*. The Healer had refused to let him see it when he had asked for it the day before, but Fleur had promised to bring him yesterday's paper when she returned — and she had actually done so.

She would be permitted to stay, then. As long as she kept her mouth shut.

BATTLE RAGES AT HOME OF WAR HERO AS DEATH EATERS ATTACK

BY RITA SKEETER

THE ESTUARY, HAMPSHIRE — The peace of this bucolic retreat from the worries of the world was shattered yesterday as renegade Death Eaters attacked the home of war hero Professor Severus Snape. The attack was led by the notorious Poindexter Alverard, known as the Interrogator of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. The apparent motive for the assault was revenge upon the professor.

"Well, Snape got up Alverard's nose, didn't he?" said Homer Thistlethwaite, who was arrested on the scene.

The intruders had come, expecting to find the professor's stepmother and sisters alone due to the quarantine on the estate, only to find a number of members of the Order of the Phoenix, war heroes, all. The only fatality amongst the defenders was Mr. Lucius Malfoy, age forty-four, of Wiltshire. Of the known Death Eaters,

the only fatality was Alverard, age forty-two, of Kent. Two other known Death Eaters arrested on the scene, Walden Macnair and Seth Mulciber, murdered Alverard by means of the Killing Curse before numerous witnesses, including members of the Auror office. Macnair and Mulciber are being held at the Ministry of Magic for trial by the Wizengamot.

The world was shocked to learn that Professor Snape's

youngest sister, Stormy Snape, is not deceased, as had been reported earlier in this newspaper. The incorrect information was given out by the Ministry of Magic, in conjunction with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, as part of a complex plan to cause the Death Eaters to show themselves.

Grumbling to himself, Snape turned the paper over to read the articles on the bottom of the folded page.

Board of Governors of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry Set Back Start Date

BY STAFF REPORTER

The Board of Governors of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry decided by unanimous vote today to delay the start of the new school year until 1st October, in deference to the number of weddings taking place.

"We will shorten the Christmas and Easter breaks by one week each and prolong the summer term for one week to make up the difference," explained Madam Mas and Easter breaks by Marchbanks, a long-time member of the Board. "We want to make things as easy as possible for our students."

Snape snorted and struggled to unfold the paper with his one good hand, turning it to read stories on the back side.

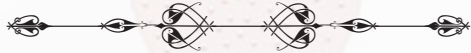
ALICIA SPINNET, SEAMUS FINNIGAN Announce Engagement, Wedding Planned for November
PANSY PARKINSON, NEVILLE LONGBOTTOM Announce Engagement, Wedding Set for End of Month

And further down the page, under the obituaries:

LUCIUS MALFOY, Controversial War Figure, Philanthropist, Dies at Age 44, Funeral Services Scheduled for Saturday

Snape dropped the newspaper and turned his face to the wall, staring at the ugly yellow paint job with unseeing eyes.

Fleur looked up from her thick, glossy wedding magazine when Snape dropped the newspaper, but she wisely kept silent.



Hermione wandered the rooms of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, unsure of what to do with herself. After many days of frantic, time-consuming activity, she was unaccustomed to the leisure time. She was also out of the loop regarding Professor Snape's condition and the goings-on at the Estuary; in a fundamental sense, she felt as if she had been separated from her own family. In short, she was bereft.

She had come so close to achieving her goal! She had been determined, since the night she spent held in Snape's vise-like grip, to make him hers. The schoolgirl admiration for the dashing double-agent had morphed into a passion of the body against which she had no defence. Months of careful observation had added to her arsenal of reasons why she wanted him; he was a brilliant scholar, a stimulating con-



versationalist, a conscientious teacher — and he was possessed of a physical presence so compelling that she woke night after night from dreams of such startling sensuality that she had begun to question her reason.

All of these things she had known before she left school, fully expecting to hear from him — desperately waiting day after day for contact of some type to initiate the after-school acquaintance he had said they might share. She had scarcely been back in her parents' home for a week before the announcement of Snape's engagement had been published in the DAILY PROPHET.

What had followed was a weekend of black depression and copious quantities of chocolate fudge ice cream. At the end of the weekend, she had cajoled her mother into spending two days with her at a wizarding spa, where she paid to learn expensive charms to tame her hair and to enhance her facial features, as well as receiving pampering of her body that left her feeling as attractive as she possibly could.

"I'm head-over-heels in love with someone who has become engaged to another woman," she explained to her mum. "I have to decide what I'm going to do."

Her decision had been to place herself in the best possible position and to observe. It quickly became obvious to her that Fleur Delacour was a heartless woman who could not make Snape happy — but, more importantly,



she would make Sophronia and the girls miserable, as well, and that just could not be permitted to happen.

That night at the Malfoy ball, when the professor had held her and danced with her, she had felt again that visceral connexion she had noticed with him, before. Their subsequent easy camaraderie in the kitchen in the wee hours of the morning had been echoed by the untroubled days at the Estuary, when she had suspected that his feelings mirrored her own. Here she was, now, scant weeks from his wedding day, and she was running out of strata-gems. He was beyond her reach, now, once again under the thumb of his fiancée, and she did not know how to reinsert herself into his life or how to remove the Veela.

She had clearly given the task her very best effort, had come quite close to success. She could not argue with his sense of honour, could she? Was it not one of those traits of his that she most admired? He had offered marriage to the Frenchwoman and he would stand by his promise to the end. Perhaps it was time to cease meddling in the affairs of an engaged couple and to bend her mind to the task of finding a man to whom she could bear to be married.

Otherwise, it would be the Office of Last Resort.



The staff of St. Mungo's was quite happy to see the



back of the most unpleasant patient in the hospital. Once the immediate danger was past, Healer Howser was compelled to permit Professor Snape to be removed to his own home, with the assurances that his potions would be administered on time and that his exercises would be performed on schedule. The Healer would pop in to change the dressings on the arm for a few days, but the bone regrowth had been accomplished, the tissue was regenerating; the muscle and tendon injury would be addressed by the assiduous practice of the prescribed exercises.

The professor was judged to be too weak to Floo home, though it was felt that he could be moved by Side-Along Apparition. The difficulty was that he obstinately refused the offers of all-comers to Disapparate him to the Estuary. He was still in considerable pain, his temper was frayed, his dignity was outraged, and he was damned if he would trust a woman to Apparate with him safely — much less one of the dunderheaded men who regularly invaded his hospital room uninvited.

Sophronia, Skye and Fleur were facing him in varying degrees of distress, flanked by Black and both of the Weasleys who had lately plagued him so. He was glaring at them all, lips pressed in an uncompromising line, arms folded stubbornly over his chest, when the obvious solution came to him. "Fetch Lucius. He can take me home."



Almost before the words were out of his mouth, he realised his error; for a fleeting moment, he even saw his own grief reflected on Sophronia's face. But to suffer the mortification of humiliating himself in this way before a gaggle of women and a pride of Gryffindors was almost more than he could bear. What kind of idiot could forget he had witnessed the death of his best friend with his own eyes?

It was with a sense of intense relief that he heard the next voice to speak.

"Master Severus does not want all these people around him when he's feeling poorly," Nanny said, stepping from the middle of the group huddling at the foot of the bed, whence she had been brought by Ronald Weasley, who had recognised the futility of continuing to argue with Snape. "Nanny will take him home. Nanny does not need any help to take care of Master Severus."

The tiny, but determined house-elf turned to the humans and shooed them with her hands. "Please go home, Mistress. We will be along directly."

"That's quite a nurse you have there, Professor," Healer Howser said from the doorway after the others trooped out. "You'll excuse us while I fill her in on your home care?"

And thus it was that Nanny successfully moved her eldest charge safely to his own bedroom, armed with the supplies and instructions to bring him back to full health

— which she meant to enforce to the letter.

Every time he opened his eyes, *she* was there. Fleur was not being too noisy, nor was she fussing over him — she just would not go away. He had suggested, as kindly as he could, that she go home, but she had confounded him by informing him that she had come for an extended stay at the Estuary.

"For though we have delayed the wedding for a month, due to your injury, we still have much planning to do," she explained.

"How kind of Sophronia," he said through clenched teeth.

"Oh, no, it was Nanny who suggested that I stay," Fleur answered him. "She moved my things into the room in which Miss Granger had been staying. Nanny is quite helpful."

"I will have to remember to thank her," Snape responded sourly.

Hermione came down the steps into the sitting room and walked directly into Remus' welcoming arms.

"How have you been?" he asked in his hoarse voice, leading her to sit on the settee before the hearth.

"I'm well, Remus — how are things with Tonks?"

Lupin stared down at his hands and shrugged. "She's

been busy with the investigation of what happened with the Death Eaters — and she's been seeing a lot of Viktor Krum."

Hermione reached out and grasped Remus' hand. "She doesn't care for Viktor, Remus."

His topaz eyes, when he raised them to her face, were full of desolation. "Then why has he offered for her?"



Sophronia sat quietly in the blue salon, an untouched magazine open on her lap, and lovingly stroked Stormy's hair. Stormy sat right beside her, seeming to derive comfort from the mere presence of her mama. The child had scarcely spoken of the battle, which she had witnessed, but she had been prone to nightmares and had become clingy in the manner of a much younger child. Sophronia did not attempt to delve into Stormy's feelings or to say anything to the child to indicate that her near-constant presence was not completely welcome. Sophronia, indeed, drew much comfort from the presence of her child.

Sirius had removed to Grimmauld Place, taking on the duties Snape had carried out there before the onset of Stormy's illness. Though Sophronia missed him, she was also slightly relieved to have time to herself. She knew that it pained Sirius to see her grieving for Lucius Malfoy, but she could not help herself. She had nearly married the man,



after all; had Sirius not shown up to sweep her off her feet at the Malfoy ball, Sophronia might now be mourning the loss of another husband, rather than the death of a friend.

Sophronia looked up as the door opened and Lorry entered, carrying the tea tray. The house-elf was in the process of setting the tea things upon the low table before the divan when a most bizarre sight intruded upon Sophronia's notice. The door, which had been left slightly ajar, was nudged open, and Hermione's cat, Crookshanks, entered the room, his tail held high. Hanging from the cat's mouth, looking like a shapeless pink kitten, was Fletcher the Pygmy Puff.

Sophronia placed a hand on Stormy's arm and nodded to Crookshanks, who had now come to a stop before the little girl, looking up at her with the squirming Pygmy Puff dangling from his mouth.

"Oh, Fletcher!" Stormy cried, sliding to her knees on the carpet, and reaching out to take the humming ball of fur from Crookshanks' mouth. "Crooks, where did you *find* him?"

Stormy nuzzled Fletcher, rubbing her cheek against his fur, and reached out a hand to Crookshanks, who butted his head against her hand and commenced to purr loudly. Stormy was quite conscious that it was when she was chasing Fletcher across the drive that Severus had been hurt; she wasn't entirely sure that it wasn't her fault, too, that



Mr. Malfoy had died. Under the weight of such sad, dark thoughts, she had not had the courage to tell any of the grown-ups that Fletcher was still missing.

Sophonria was smiling tenderly down at her daughter and the two magical creatures when Nanny came into the room.

“Mistress, Nanny is needing your help with Master Severus.”



Sophonria, oddly enough, was the only one who did not try to change his mind.

“Lucius was my best friend for more than twenty years,” Snape said stubbornly. “I *will* attend his funeral.”

Though he was still very weak, and having to take a number of potions on a strict schedule, Sophronia gave him her support.

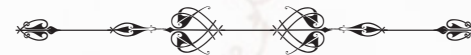
“I will ask Draco to help me take him to the Manor for the service,” she said quietly to Nanny. “We will get along without difficulty — please do not worry about it.”

And that Saturday morning in August found a large number of people assembled for the funeral of Lucius Malfoy. Rows of chairs began in the formal gardens and continued down to the family crypt. Draco, who appeared at the Estuary and moved Snape to the Manor by Side-Along Apparition, was very thankful for the presence of



his father’s closest friend. Snape sat with Draco and Luna as the service took place, while Sophronia sat with Sirius and the other members of the Order of the Phoenix, who had turned out in force to honour this fallen member of their group. Lucius Malfoy had not been trusted by all of the Order members, but no one could gainsay the fact that he had passed information which had helped to win the war. That he had lost his life in defence of the home of an Order member, fighting Death Eaters in the company of other Order members, had raised his credit amongst even his harshest critics.

Hermione sat between Harry and Ron, unable to keep her mind on the loss of a comrade as she gazed at Professor Snape, who sat at Draco’s right looking ill, but resolute. Her hand ached to smooth the twist of sorrow from his lip, but he was unaware of her presence. She gripped her hands in her lap and turned her attention back to the speaker.



Snape shifted uncomfortably in his bed and scowled at the potions sitting on the bedside table; one was red and one was green. He knew he had to keep on taking the blood replenishing potion for the next two days, but he was sick to death of it. There was nothing he hated more than being out of control of what was happening in his



life, and he was just about at the worst place he had ever been in that regard, now.

With an exaggerated sigh, he picked up the red potion with his good right hand and poured the disgusting mess down his throat. In mid-gulp, there was a firm knock at his bedroom door. Before he could tell them to “Go away!” the door was opened and Ronald Weasley had the temerity to enter his room.

“Are you lost, Mr. Weasley?” he inquired nastily.

“No, sir. Madam Snape asked me to come up and play chess with you.”

Ron took the hospital tray which had been Transfigured from an end table and arranged it so that the table lay across Snape’s lap, then fetched the chessboard from the table near the window and placed it before the scowling Potions master. Mindful of Sophronia’s instructions, Ron behaved as if Snape was cooperating with him, setting out the chess pieces and pulling up a chair.

“Black or white, sir?”

Snape looked pointedly in the other direction.

“Right. I’ll take the white, then,” Ron said cheerfully, and promptly moved a pawn. “Your move, sir.”

Bringing the full force of his disdainful sneer to bear upon Weasley’s face, Snape inquired silkily, “What makes you think I would bother to play chess with *you*?”

“Because your best mate is gone, Professor, and he won’t be along to play chess with you anymore. I’ve heard that even *he* didn’t give you a very good game.” Ron looked him in the face, his expression neutral. “Well, not many people give *me* a good game, either.”

Snape’s mouth tightened at the mention of Lucius; the ripple of suppressed grief attempted to rise again, and he spoke harshly in an effort to push it away from him.

“When you play with idiots like Potter, what do you expect?”

Ron crossed one long leg over the other and settled back like a man prepared to stay for a while. “I’ve also played with Professor Dumbledore,” he commented mildly.

“You?” Snape ejaculated.

Ron nodded.

“I don’t believe you.”

Ron shrugged indifferently. “You might want to give me a try and see if I’m worth your time at the game, sir. It’s not as if you have many pressing engagements right now.”

Snape ground his teeth, glaring at the irritating Weasley.

Ron cocked his head to one side. “You’re not *afraid* to play chess with a Gryffindor, are you, Professor?”

Snape jerked himself forward so quickly that he bumped his left arm on the tray, setting off a wave of agony. Ron surged to his feet and grabbed the water glass from the

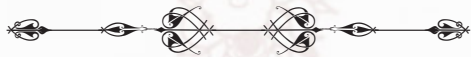
table as well as the greenish potion, and held both out to the gasping wizard in the bed.

"I recognize this green one; it's for pain," Ron said conversationally, offering it to Snape.

The professor snatched the phial from Weasley's hand and upended it over his mouth, then handed the phial to Weasley and accepted the water glass, gulping down the remaining liquid.

"Insolent whelp," he snapped, the breathless quality of his voice robbing the words of their usual sting.

"That's right," Ron said encouragingly. "Show me what a dolt I am." Resuming his seat by the chess board, he regarded the professor with polite interest. "It's your move."



Snape's recovery seemed to speed up from that point forward. The Weasley jackanapes had defeated him at chess all too handily; so it was clearly incumbent upon him to properly reorder his senses again.

Mornings he spent doing the hellacious, repetitive movements with his arm and hand, which caused the tendons and muscles to knit properly, restoring function to him. In the afternoons, he rested and, in the evenings, he received visitors, such as the Chess Demon, Ronald Weasley.

Unfortunately, Fleur did not feel herself to be affected



by the schedule to which Snape so fiercely adhered. She felt free to enter and exit his rooms at will, her light, loving manner reminiscent of her actions when she had first convinced him she would make a good wife for him.

He was perspicacious enough to realise that her behaviour was due, in part, to the absence of Miss Granger. A non-threatened Fleur was a far more appealing woman. The other component of her happier conduct was their impending nuptials. Fleur was moving about the Estuary with the eye of a woman about to take possession of something which she has long coveted. Her attitude clearly won her no admirers amongst the denizens of the estate.

"No, I do not wish for you to uproot the roses and to plant the beds with irises!" he snapped querulously to the gardener one afternoon, as he was interrupted dozing over SENSE AND SENSIBILITY. "What gave you that ridiculous idea?"

The gardener twisted his cap nervously. "It was your lady, Professor Snape. She was down the gardens this morning with a notepad and a pen, talking about renovations."

"No changes will be made at this time, Chance," he said with finality.

Next, it was the housekeeper.

"Of course I do not wish to replace all the linens!" he said impatiently when the housekeeper sought him out in the midst of his exercises one morning. "See Madam



Snape about those things, Mrs. Booker. She is the mistress of the house.”

“It was Miss Delacour who suggested it to me, sir, and I know that *she* will soon be the mistress of the house...”

“We will make no purchases at this time, thank you. I will speak to Miss Delacour.”

The next time he saw Fleur, she was standing in the window embrasure in his bedroom, rubbing the fabric of the heavy green velvet curtains between her fingers.

“May I help you?” he inquired icily.

Fleur turned to him with a loving smile. “Hello, darling! How are you feeling today?” She came towards him and leaned up to press a kiss to the corner of his mouth. “Only a month more, Severus — can you believe it? And we’ll be husband and wife...” She rubbed her cheek against his coat, wrapping her arms about his waist.

Snape stood rigidly. “Why were you inspecting the draperies?”

Fleur released him and stepped back, a more calculating look in her eye at his lack of response. “I am trying to decide what colour I want for this room.”

“I do not wish to change the colours of my room,” he returned adamantly.

“But, *darling*,” she responded, her voice growing sharper, “it will soon be *my* room as well, and I do not care for green.”

“Of course this will not be your room,” he answered impatiently, turning from her and striding through the adjacent doorway, to his desk, with something approaching his old grace. “This is a very large house, Fleur. You will have a room of your own, which you may decorate in any way you see fit. Speak to Sophronia about it; she will find a room appropriate for you.”

“Will Sophronia live with us after she marries Mr. Black?” Fleur inquired, following him into his private study.

Snape looked up, frowning. “Sophronia is not engaged to be married to anyone.”

Fleur’s laugh sounded a bit forced. “Surely you cannot fail to see that she is in love with Sirius Black? Do get your head out of the ground, Severus. All I am asking is whether they will make their home at the Estuary after they are married.”

“I have no wish to discuss this now, Fleur. Please leave me in peace so that I may look over these accounts.” He opened the estate ledger and fixed his gaze on the columns of figures until she flounced out of the room.



Nanny was going out of her way to look after Master Severus’ fiancée in a way that only the maven of the Estuary nursery could do.

Fleur was sitting in her room at her writing desk, pen-

ning a note to her mother one day when Nanny popped in with a snack of tea and cakes for her. Declining the cakes, Fleur sipped at her tea, avidly eyeing the old baby things which Nanny produced from her capacious pockets.

"This is the cap that has been worn by the heirs of the Estuary for generations," Nanny said, smiling grimly when the Frenchwoman reached out one finger to stroke the soft fabric. "Snape babies are always big — it's the large brain cages, you know, for all the Snape children are highly intelligent." Fleur's eyes narrowed slightly as she raised her head to look at Nanny's face. Blandly, the house-elf continued, "It's a hard birth, pushing out a big-headed baby, but the mistresses of the Estuary are always happy to make that sacrifice. What is the importance of a trim figure when compared to a healthy heir for the estate?"

"Sophronia is trim!" Fleur objected worriedly.

"Oh, not compared to her figure *before* the babies came," Nanny said with mock sympathy. "But after the first baby, it's easier, for your body is all stretched out and is never the same again," the nurse added helpfully.

"Well, times have changed, Nanny. Women have babies and get their figures back all the time, now."

"Maybe after just *one* baby, you might," Nanny allowed. "But Snapes have large families. It's in the terms of the family trust, you know; more income every year for each



additional child born to the master of the Estuary."

Fleur's eyes grew round as Nanny tucked the cap back in her pocket and began to back away. "Don't fret, Miss; you're so very pretty, I'm sure that Master Severus will love you no matter if you lose your shape."

And on those horrific words, the house-elf popped out of the room.



As Snape regained strength, his mind turned one again to his duties. Although he could not and would not consider the job of finding a husband for Hermione Granger, he was still troubled by his failure to see Nymphadora Tonks safely into an engagement. Of all the Order's young women, Tonks alone was the one whose father had charged Snape with her wellbeing as he bled to death at the Potion master's feet.

It was, therefore, a happy day when he received word from Minerva that Tonks had received an offer of marriage from Viktor Krum.

"When will the announcement be made?" he asked McGonagall.

"Nymphadora hasn't decided yet," Minerva replied hesitantly.

"Merlin's beard!" Snape said testily. "Is this not precisely the way she behaved when Lupin offered for her?"

"You know it is, Severus," McGonagall replied tartly.

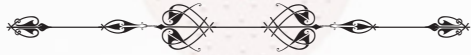


Snape pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. "We will be back in Grimmauld Place by the end of the week, but I do not wish to let this languish that long. Would you ask Tonks to come to the Estuary to see me, please?"

"And shall I have her bring you a pot of chicken soup, as well?" Minerva inquired sweetly.

"Don't test me, Minerva. I am perfectly well enough to hex you."

"Not on your best day," McGonagall replied before ending the Floo conversation.



Hermione glared at Alicia, Ginny, and Luna, who stood in her bedroom, their arms crossed mulishly across their chests.

"I don't *want* to go to any parties!" Hermione explained again. "Be reasonable!"

Ginny flung herself over to the clothes cupboard and opened the doors. "Do you want to wear a dress or robes?" she inquired.

"I want to be left alone!" Hermione answered.

Luna put an arm about Hermione's shoulders and rubbed her back in soothing circles. "Draco and I are staying in, tonight," she said. "Hermione could stay with us."

Alicia removed Hermione from Luna's embrace and seated her before the dressing table.



"No, Luna, Hermione still hasn't found the man she wants to marry, and that's what these parties are for."

Hermione batted Alicia's hands away as the older girl began to arrange the unruly curls.

"This gold dress is one of your favourites," Ginny said, removing it from the cupboard before bending down to pick up the matching shoes. She crossed to stand to one side of Alicia and to look into Hermione's face as it was reflected in the mirror. "It's natural for you to feel a bit down after spending so much time caring for sick people and going through traumatic things, Hermione. Frankly, you're acting as if you've spent too much time with Professor Snape and he is rubbing off on you. Going out tonight will give your thoughts a new direction. And, who knows? You might just meet Mr. Right!"

Giving in to the inevitable, Hermione allowed her friends to dress her for the party.



Ginny had been right about one thing — it *was* something of a relief to lose herself in dancing and bantering with her partners, Hermione decided. Remus claimed her for the first two dances and she felt safe and comfortable in his arms.

"Come with me to the refreshment table," she invited him after the second dance, her eyes fixed on Tonks and

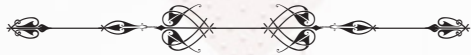


Viktor, who were picking up glasses of punch.

Remus followed her gaze. "Oh, what's the point in pretending any more, Hermione? Tonks is obviously happy with Krum."

Hermione took his hand and began to walk toward the other couple. "Don't be a quitter, Remus. Tonks hasn't even said 'yes,' yet. It's not over until it's over."

Hearing the words she was speaking to her friend made Hermione smile to herself. *That's just exactly what I need to hear, she thought. He hasn't married her yet — and they're coming back to Grimmauld Place this weekend — it's not over 'til it's over.*



Percy Weasley watched jealously as Hermione walked off the dance floor hand-in-hand with Lupin. She had been back at Grimmauld Place for several days but he, Percy, had not yet secured a visit with her. His persistent calls at Order headquarters had been met each time with the news that Hermione was out, or was indisposed, yet here she was, looking healthy and quite pretty. Squaring his shoulders and pushing his glasses more firmly up his face, Percy strode over to Hermione.

Tonks was, unfortunately, the first one to see him approaching. "Hello, Percy. What brings you here, tonight?"

Krum, Lupin, and Hermione turned to look at him, then.



"I'm here for the party, Nymphadora, as no doubt you are, as well." Turning his shoulder rather pointedly to Tonks, Percy held out his hand to Hermione. "You're looking lovely tonight, Hermione. I am so glad to see you safely back from the Estuary. May I call upon you tomorrow?"

Taking his hand politely, Hermione anxiously wracked her brain for an excuse. "Oh, Remus and I are going to see how the professor is getting along tomorrow — aren't we, Remus?"

Answering her frantic glance, Remus replied in the affirmative.

"Then may I have this dance?" Percy continued.

Hermione excused herself to the others and followed Percy into the waltz.

"I asked after you every day, while you were gone," Percy told her, looking down into her face.

"You did?" Hermione said, not sounding at all gratified by Percy's confession.

Percy pressed his lips together in displeasure and carefully considered the girl in his arms. She was not as tall as Miss Delacour, though her height was perfectly adequate, of course. She was not as thin as Miss Delacour; her breasts were fuller, and her hips and bottom more rounded — but those were attractive attributes in a woman. Hermione seldom spoke to him with the same level of respect shown by Miss Delacour — but Hermione had always been out-



spoken, and Percy had admired her for that.

"When will your parents be home?" he blurted.

Hermione looked at him, then, alarmed by the unwelcome tone of urgency in his voice. "I don't expect them back until September, actually."

Percy pulled her body closer to him, bending his head so that his breath stirred the hair at her temple. "I am very anxious to speak with your father, you know, Hermione. *Very* anxious."

Hermione pulled back from him, putting distance between their bodies without breaking out of his embrace; she did not wish to make a scene in the middle of the dance floor. "Percy, I wish you will stop deluding yourself that my answer to your offer will magically change because my parents come home from Ibiza. Sometimes 'no' really does mean NO."

Thankfully, the dance came to an end and Hermione turned away from him, walking swiftly back towards the refreshment table, with Percy following closely behind her, apologising for his impropriety.

"I know this is neither the time nor the place," he said to her, somehow obtaining possession of her hand and holding it between his own. "Forgive me for the violence of my emotion, which drives me to behave this way."

Hermione bit her lip, determined not to laugh at his

dispassionate declaration of emotional violence, and removed her hand from his. "It's all right, Percy, just stop thinking that I am going to change my mind. I am *not*."

A familiar, friendly voice spoke from behind her. "Good evening. Will I be lucky enough to get a dance with you this evening, Miss Granger?"

Hermione had the fleeting impression of fury crossing Percy's face before she turned away from him to see Healer Howser smiling down at her.

"Healer Howser!" Hermione said, smiling in greeting. "What are you doing here?"

"Hopefully, I am dancing with you," he replied, offering his arm to her.

"Of course," Hermione agreed, allowing him to escort her onto the dance floor, away from a glowering Percy Weasley.

"Even Healers have to marry, you know," he told her as he took her into his arms and they began to dance.

Hermione laughed. "Well, I suppose they do."

The Healer smiled broadly. "Oh, I'll have to think of something funny to say."

"Why?"

"Because you are enchanting when you laugh," Healer Howser told her, sincerely.

"You *are* silly," Hermione told him, charmed in spite of herself.

Earlier that day, Tonks had spent a very uncomfortable hour with Severus Snape.

“What do you want me to say, Severus?” she demanded, pacing the rug before his desk, while Snape watched her with partially lidded eyes.

“There is no magic phrase I wish to hear you utter, Tonks,” he replied. “I simply want to know when you are going to stop acting like a child and get down to the business of finding a husband.”

“I’m doing my best,” she snapped.

“You’ll pardon me if I fail to agree with you,” he said with mock courtesy.

“There’s no need for you to get nasty with me!” she flared at him.

“This is not nasty, Tonks. This is concerned. Nasty is not nearly so pleasant.”

“Very funny,” she muttered under her breath.

Recognising that the Gryffindor witch was not responding to the direct approach, Snape subtly changed tactics. “You’ve had two offers of marriage made to you and you have never given a definitive answer to either petition. Why is that?” Snape asked in his most reasonable tone.

“I was *going* to accept Remus, Severus, truly I was,” Tonks

confessed, dropping into the chair across from him. “But he became ill and went away for a month and asked Sirius to entertain me — and he never said another word to me about it, until the day he withdrew his offer.”

Snape made a sound to indicate that he was listening to her, letting the silence encourage her to continue to speak, which she did.

“I know I should accept Viktor, but I’m afraid that we don’t love each other.”

After several beats of silence, Snape spoke. “You do understand that love is not a requirement for a functional marriage,” he said, quoting the conventional wisdom with which he had been raised.

Tonks snorted incredulously. “What Time Turner took *you* into the Dark Ages, Severus? I don’t know anyone who wants a ‘functional marriage,’ do you?”

Though he could not bring himself to voice the words aloud, Snape knew that Tonks spoke the truth. No doubt, even Fleur believed that he would fall victim to her charms and come to love her, after they were married.

Keeping his voice casual, Snape said, “Is there anyone you *do* love, Tonks?”

A sound between a sob and a laugh escaped her lips. “He’s already interested in someone else,” she managed to say.

“But not engaged?”

"Not yet — but he doesn't care for me; he cares for another girl."

"Are you sure?" Snape probed. "Isn't it worth finding out for certain?"

Though Tonks scarcely seemed to be attending to him, Snape heard his own words with an inner grimace. *Hark who's talking*, he thought. *Who better than I to give advice about how not to enter a loveless marriage.*

Tonks was gazing at him but not seeing him; it was obvious to him that her thoughts were elsewhere. With scarcely a twinge of conscience, he looked into her eyes and delved delicately into her mind. Almost immediately, he was thrust unceremoniously out.

"Severus!" Tonks cried, outraged.

"Sorry," he murmured. "Force of habit."

Tonks stood. "I'm leaving. You should be ashamed of yourself!"

Staring at the door so recently slammed behind the retreating Metamorphmagus, Snape said aloud, "I *should* be many things, Nymphadora — but being ashamed is at the top of my to-do list, I assure you."



Nanny packed Snape's trunk in silence, occasionally casting shrewd glances at him as he sat before the hearth,



reading the leather-bound book he had picked up from his bedside table. At last, she spoke.

"Miss Stormy is so happy to be returning to Grimmauld Place; she has been missing Miss Hermione something fierce."

Snape grunted, but did not look up from his book; Fleur had finally returned to her mother's home the day before and, at last, he had a bit of quiet to do some reading.

"Nanny misses Miss Hermione, too, Master Severus. She was always interested in everything that was going on in the house, without being nosy or bossy about it. She always had a kind word for everyone she saw, even house-elves. Miss Hermione took care of Miss Stormy and of you as if she were a Snape herself."

Nanny wisely kept her head down, continuing to fold and pack garments in the trunk which would go with Snape to Grimmauld Place, and from there, back to Hogwarts.

At length, Snape spoke. "I know what you're trying to do, Nanny — but please do not." There was the tiniest hint of vulnerability in his voice.

Nanny advanced on him now, the predator smelling blood in the water. "We *all* miss her, Master Severus — do you?"

Snape threw the book down on the ottoman at his feet and glared at her. "Well, *you* seem to know everything — *do* I?"

Placing her hands on her little elf hips, Nanny stared him down. "Give over, Master Severus, you *know* you do



— and you will miss her *forever* if you don't get your head out of your cauldron!"

Snape lunged to his feet. "She would not miss *me!*" he proclaimed violently, voicing both his strongest belief and his worst fear.

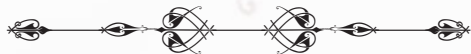
Nanny maintained her stance, only the angle at which she held her head to see his face changed by his altered position.

"She is *always* missing you," Nanny said softly, her voice entreating him to hear her words. "Nanny found her in your room with her face buried in your robes when Miss Fleur sent her away from the hospital room."

Snape stared at her, hope warring with despair in his chest, until he felt he could not catch a breath.

"Out!" he bellowed at her, advancing threateningly. "Get *out* and do not return unless you are called!"

Nanny had a great deal of leeway in her duties at the Estuary, but she could not disobey a direct order from an adult family member. Leaving him with a look of deep reproach, Nanny snapped her fingers, and was gone.



Snape was startled out of his brooding the next day by a knock on the bedroom door.

"Enter," he said, continuing to manipulate the many-coloured cube he had found in his bag when he was finish-



ing his packing for the removal the next day to Grimmauld Place. He had brought it from France for Stormy, but she had yet to receive her gift from him.

"Severus?" a voice called from his bedroom.

Good God, it was Lupin.

"In the study, Lupin," he said shortly.

"I'm here too, Professor."

The desk surface looked remarkably inviting; he wondered if a sound smack with his head would render him unconscious and unavailable for chatting with the two people he least wished to see.

Snape stood courteously as Lupin and Miss Granger entered his study.

"To what do I owe this honour?" he inquired sardonically.

"We came to see how you're getting along," Lupin replied in a cheerful way.

"Well, Lupin, you might have waited another day and you could have seen me in Grimmauld Place."

There was a thudding noise from the next room as his bedroom door was thrown open.

"Hermione!" Stormy's voice preceded her into the room, where she promptly threw herself into Hermione's arms. "I haven't seen you in *forever!*" Stormy proclaimed. "Come on! Come see my new dresses!"

With an apologetic smile for Lupin and a murmured,



“Good bye, Professor,” Hermione allowed herself to be dragged out of the study.

Snape watched Lupin’s expression as Hermione clambered over him to reach the doorway; an imp of jealousy goaded him to purr, “When will I be receiving your offer for her, Lupin?”

Lupin looked back at Snape guiltily. “I beg your pardon, Severus, I wasn’t listening — when will I do what?”

Snape leaned his elbows on the desktop. “When will you offer for Miss Granger?”

Lupin’s mouth dropped open. “What possible business could that be of yours, Severus?”

Snape’s eyebrows rose dramatically. “Perhaps you have forgotten that Dumbledore left me *in loco parentis* for the young witches of the Order? I am fully within my rights to ask what your intentions are in regard to Miss Granger.”

Lupin regarded him soberly for a moment. “I will see you in hell first, Severus. I am not discussing my intentions, whether good, bad, or indifferent, with you.”

Snape sneered at him openly. “You’re toying with her, aren’t you? Using her for werewolf bait, perhaps?”

Lupin crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. “Now, why would you care, Severus? The young men under my care have been all about the young women in your charge all summer long, and I have never yet heard of you

asking anyone’s intentions — not even those of the men pursuing your own sisters.”

Snape glared at him, lips pressed tight in a thin white line. Lupin held his gaze steadily, the alpha male refusing to look down; incensed, Snape invoked a non-verbal *Legilimens* and was momentarily staggered by what he saw.

Tonks?

Lupin was pining for *Tonks*? He had his hands all over Hermione every time Snape saw them together, and he preferred Nymphadora Tonks?

The werewolf was clearly deranged.

“Oh, don’t get your knickers in a twist, Lupin,” he said, nonchalantly. “I just want you to know that if you break her heart, you’ll likely have Potter and Ronald Weasley to deal with.”

Lupin laughed. “Hermione’s heart is not in danger,” he said easily, before changing to a safer subject.



After hearing the bedroom door closing behind the departing Lupin, Snape leant back in his chair, his hands behind his head, and stared at the ceiling. What if Tonks’ secret *tendre* was for Lupin? But how could that be possible? If she had a passion for Lupin, she could have said ‘yes’ to the marriage proposal and would likely have been brewing a litter of were-pups by now. It just did not make sense.

What made even less sense, however, was Hermione's behaviour. For the last two months, he had assumed that everything she had done to drive him insane was done precisely for that purpose: to make him wild. But why would she do that? She had been a well-behaved student, when she was not following Potter on his ill-judged exploits. She had never, until he had met her at Grimmauld Place after the announcement of his engagement, acted towards him in a manner that he could have described as mocking or taunting. In that case, why had he chosen to perceive every act of hers since they had come to live under the same roof at headquarters as a personal affront?

On the other hand, did she have cause to be miffed with him? Well, perhaps she did. He *had* told her that they could see one another after she left school, but instead of doing that, he had become engaged to another woman. But not before he had seen her kissing Krum! Or — at the very least — he had seen Krum kissing *her*. But had he not also seen Krum kiss Tonks, in exactly the same fashion, and for the same reason? Perhaps it was simply Krum's Bulgarian reaction to winning a Quidditch match: Kiss the nearest pretty girl.

Rising from his chair with a growl, Snape began to pace the small space in the study, his brain struggling to sort out fact from assumption.

If one were to remove from the equation the possibility

that she was deliberately provoking him to anger, what could one interpret her recent actions to mean?

Dear God.

What a cursed fool he had been.

He felt the rising of hope within himself like a tide that would carry him surely out to sea, but for once he made no effort to stem the emotion — he did not care if he was moved to have a silly smirk upon his face.

Oh, there was much planning to do, there were many instructions to be given — there was no more time to waste.

"Nanny!" he bellowed, and was gratified to see the house-elf pop obediently into his room, though she had avoided him since he had ordered her away the night before.

"Yes, Master Severus?" Nanny said in frosty tones.

"You remember our discussion of last evening?" he asked her.

Nanny nodded, observing him through cannily narrowed eyes.

"You were quite correct. That being true, there is much to be done to bring matters right. I have a project for which I require your assistance. May I depend upon you?"

For several beats, Nanny simply looked at him, her wise old eyes searching his face. Snape stood before her, making no effort to hide his thoughts or feelings from her. After what seemed an impossibly long time, Nanny

executed a bow which brought her forehead quite close to the rug beneath her feet.

"Of course, Master. In what way may Nanny be of service to her Master?"

SOPHRONIA WAS sitting quietly in the parlour at the top of the house, embroidering the edge of a pillowcase and relishing being back at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. She knew that with the changes coming in the lives of her family — marriages for Severus, Skye, and even for herself — that they were about to go through a major upheaval. The time she had spent living at headquarters had been happy for her; she had come to make a very dear friend in Minerva McGonagall, she had come to care deeply for the young women in her charge, and she had found her Siri again — how could she fail to be happy under such circumstances? In the midst of the inevitable adjustments, it was good to have some things that would be unchanging. This inconvenient old house felt like a friend to her and she was content to be there.

She became aware of Severus' presence in the room only after he had settled across from her in a squashy old armchair.

"Good morning, Severus," she said with a gentle smile. "We missed you at breakfast."

Snape studied her face thoughtfully, but she had the impression he was seeing something — or *someone* — else. "I had an errand to run early this morning," he said.

Sophronia continued to ply her needle, but she surreptitiously checked him over, noting that he was looking better with each passing day. She knew that he continued to perform the exercises for his hand and arm each morning, and he no longer wore the sling about his neck in which to rest the arm; his colour was also improving. Overall, she privately thought he looked healthier than he had *before* his injury.

"Sophronia, I have a favour to ask of you," Snape said diffidently, removing a slim black velvet box from the inner pocket of his coat.

"Of course, Severus," she replied, putting her sewing aside and giving him her full attention.

"I feel that we owe Miss Granger such a debt of gratitude for all that she has done for us since Stormy became ill — I have procured a gift for her from the family, which I would like for you to present to her."

Snape passed the box to Sophronia, who promptly opened

it and surveyed the item displayed against the royal blue satin within. A bracelet, strung with large, lustrous, silvery pearls and secured with a gently ridged platinum clasp met her gaze.

Sophronia, who had in her possession the pearls that she had inherited from her mother, gasped. "Good heavens, Severus, these are South Sea pearls! They are terribly expensive!"

Snape regarded her blandly. "I don't know what you're talking about, Sophronia. It's just a trinket."

"Severus, anyone who knows anything about jewellery will know that pearls of this size are *not* a trinket!"

"Well, I certainly was not aware of that fact, Sophronia, and I do not see any reason for you to be trumpeting it all over the house, do you?"

Sophronia closed the case and looked Snape in the face, troubled. "No, I don't have to tell her — but I think she should know how costly it is — she would be appalled if she were careless with it, and later found out how expensive it had been."

"Perhaps they are not authentic pearls," he suggested.

Sophronia gave him a hesitant look. "I may not be very knowledgeable, Severus, but I know genuine South Sea pearls when I see them."

Snape looked slightly exasperated. "Then perhaps you could delay telling her how costly they are until a later time? Surely, it is uncouth to give a gift and then announce how much gold one spent to purchase it? I would not wish for her

to feel self-conscious or uncomfortable with our gift to her."

Sophronia nodded. "If you wish, Severus. I will be happy to present her with the gift."

"I will let you know when to give it to her. I doubt if she will be so ill-mannered as to ask you, but do tell her *you* chose it for her, if she should inquire."

"All right," she agreed. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Snape stood, shaking his head. "No, that will be all. I will be out for the rest of the day; I am escorting Fleur to the Estuary to see the bedroom which will be hers, so that she may begin to make decorating plans."

"Very well, Severus. Have a nice time."

He smiled grimly. "I firmly intend to do so."



Snape called for Fleur at her family's townhouse, and they Disappeared from there to the Estuary. Fleur continued in her sunny, happy spirits, her manner towards Snape a judicious mix of affection and reserve.

They were admitted to the house by deeply bowing house-elves, and Snape led Fleur up to the floor where his bedroom was located. They walked along the corridor to his door, which he opened, permitting her to enter.

Fleur glanced over her shoulder at him as he followed her

into his bedroom, closing the door behind them. He detected a hopeful gleam and saw her cast a speculative glance at his bed before turning a look of calculated confusion to him.

“But I thought we were to have separate rooms, darling,” she purred, moving against him with a suggestive wriggle before twining her arms about his waist.

Snape disengaged her arms and maintained his hold on one of her wrists as he pulled her along to a door newly installed in his bedroom wall. “Yes, our rooms will be separate, but not *distant*,” he answered, opening the new door. “Your room will be through here.”

Fleur stepped eagerly through the open door to look quickly about the chamber. The immediate impression was one of light; the floor-to-ceiling windows lining the far wall were uncovered, permitting a spill of light into the airy room. The walls were painted a rich cream and were unadorned. The furniture was of blond oak, elegant and dainty.

“As you can see, the colours for the carpeting, draperies, and bedclothes have been left for you to determine, as well as any paintings you wish to have hung here.” Snape leaned a shoulder against the doorframe, watching his fiancée’s reaction to the room.

“It is perfect, Severus,” she said, turning to him with a genuinely delighted expression.

He moved the connecting door further open, so that it

came to rest against the wall of her room. “I am pleased that you are pleased.”

She came towards him again, smiling, until her attention was distracted by the door. She looked at the old-fashioned doorknob on Snape’s side of the door, then pulled the door away from the wall to see there *was* no doorknob on her side of the door.

“Why do I have no doorknob on my side?” she asked, puzzled.

Snape’s eyebrows rose steeply. “Why would you need one?”

“So that I may enter your room, of course!”

“Oh, my,” Snape said, his voice full of amusement. “How very *modern* of you, my dear.”

Fleur’s chin came up; she did not care to be an object of amusement. “I do not understand you,” she said stiffly.

“Must I spell it out for you?” he said, his voice a silky purr. “Is it really the custom in France for witches to enter their husbands’ bedrooms unbidden?”

Seriously discomposed, Fleur turned away from him, struggling to match his tone.

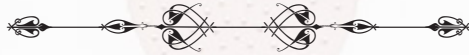
“Is it the custom in England for wizards to enter their wives’ bedrooms unbidden?” she countered.

He was behind her in a whisper of movement so swift she was uncertain how he had accomplished it. “It is,

indeed," he breathed into her ear. "I suggest you begin to acquaint yourself with English customs."

Before she could properly react, he was moving away from her. "I will leave the door open, for now, so that you may have access to the Floo, in case you should need it. Nanny is available to assist you; simply call for her."

Fleur watched her hateful fiancé stride away, her fists clenched in impotent fury, her former joy in the room forgotten.



The next morning, Tonks entered the ladies' sitting room at the top of the house after breakfast and found Sophronia and Minerva there, engaged in needlework and desultory conversation. They looked up when the younger witch entered, both of them immediately put on their guard by the look of mischief on the Auror's heart-shaped face.

"Well?" Minerva inquired as Tonks dropped into an armchair.

"Bill is here," Tonks imparted.

Sophonria glanced at her sharply. "Did he ask for Skye?"

"No, he confirmed with Dobby that Severus is in the library and went there directly."

Minerva looked over to Sophronia, concern etched in her lined face. "Is William here for a purpose?"



Sophonria kept her eyes on her sewing. "I believe so."
"Is it safe?"

Tonks could not avoid a chuckle of amusement at Minerva's slightly panicked tone; Sophronia smiled, her eyes never leaving the embroidery hoop. "I believe the serpent has been de-fanged," she murmured.



Snape sat in the library in Grimmauld Place, enjoying another cup of coffee as he perused the morning paper. The rapping on the library door elicited only a lazy, "Come," from him.

Bill Weasley entered the room and closed the door behind him, moving with a deliberate assurance which suited him well.

"Good morning, Professor," Bill said. "May I sit?"

Snape made an expansive gesture and leaned back in his chair, his hands settling quietly on the blotter before him. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

"I was expecting you sooner," Snape said calmly.

"Were you?" Bill responded evenly. "I felt that it would be improper to approach you when you were unwell."

Snape nodded. "Your restraint is admirable, as it was when you were acting as chaperone, here." A look of sardonic amusement touched his eyes. "I understand from



Sophronia that Skye was quite beside herself with vexation that you maintained your distance.”

A ghost of a smile crossed Bill’s lips. “There was some displeasure expressed, as I recall,” he allowed. After a moment, he leant forward. “I daresay you know why I’ve come.”

“Yes, I know.”

“I realise that I will never be able to offer her a home equal to the Estuary,” Bill began.

Snape raised one hand to silence him. “Mr. Weasley, do you love Skye?”

“Yes.”

“Will you give your life to make her happy, always honour and protect her?”

“Yes, Professor — with all my heart.”

Snape stood, walking around the desk to offer his hand to the astonished Bill Weasley. “I understand that you have already discussed this with Sophronia, and she has relayed her wishes to me. I accept your suit on behalf of my sister, Mr. Weasley. Welcome to the family.”

Bill shot to his feet, readily accepting Snape’s handshake. “I expected this to take longer,” he admitted, with some show of relief.

Snape looked the younger man directly in the eyes. “You risked your life to protect her and her entire family, Bill. You earned the right to marry her, if it is what you

both want — and Skye has made her wishes perfectly clear to me, I assure you.”

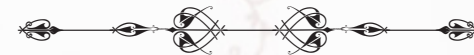
“Thank you, Severus,” Bill said, slightly stressing the use of Snape’s given name. “I’ll have the solicitor send the contract to you.”

The door burst open and Skye rushed into the room, bypassing her new fiancé to deliver a tearful hug to her brother. Snape looked over Skye’s head to see Shadow standing in the corridor, a wistful smile on her face.

“Is there no privacy to be had in this house?” Snape demanded, his fierce tone belied by his half-smile.

Shadow hastily stuffed the familiar-looking flesh-coloured string she was holding into her pocket. Giving Skye an awkward pat upon her back, Snape said, “Oh, God, I’m going to be related to Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes.”

He was still hearing Skye’s joyful laugh in his mind long after the door closed again, returning his privacy to him.



Sophronia’s anxious ears heard the approaching footsteps long before Skye entered the sitting room, her fingers twined with Bill’s on one side and with Shadow’s on the other. She stood as they entered the room, as did Minerva.

“Mum, he said ‘yes!’” Skye said breathlessly, releasing her companions and tumbling into her mother’s arms.

Bill accepted Professor McGonagall's congratulations with a hug and a kiss which startled an exclamation from her. "This is precisely how you behaved at the Malfoy Ball when I told you that Skye was not betrothed to anyone," she said, slapping him on the arm and patting her hair to make sure it had not been disarranged by his enthusiasm.

Bill stepped over to Skye, who was standing in the circle of her mother's arm, and he took her hands, looking down into her eyes. "I was strolling down Diagon Alley, feeling sorry for myself, when I glanced into the windows of Madam Malkin's and saw an angel in a wedding wreath. I knew that I had to have that girl for my own — and now I do."

The older women looked on at the lovers with indulgence; Sophronia had recourse to her handkerchief. Only Shadow, seated to one side and completely forgotten, watched their interplay with such ineffable sadness.



Fleur stepped through the Floo into Snape's bedroom, glancing about for the ubiquitous Nanny before creeping into his study. She would not need to investigate on her own, if her fiancé would be more forthcoming with her.

Murmuring a spell to light the candles in the study, she seated herself at the desk and began to rifle through the drawers, looking for clues as to his activities. She seldom



saw him these days; between the incessant fittings for herself and her bridesmaids, her meetings with the decorator, the last-minute details of their wedding, and the whirl of London social life, there was scarcely any time to spend with her soon-to-be husband... not that she was sure he wanted to spend time with her, even if he could.

Abandoning the drawers, Fleur became aware of a slip of paper sticking out from beneath the blotter. Glancing again to make sure that she was unobserved, she pulled the slip of paper out, smoothing the surface tentatively. Engraved at the top of the bill of sale were the words: GRUNDELL AND RIDGES, JEWELLERS TO THE DISCRIMINATING WIZARD SINCE 1217. DIAGON ALLEY, PARIS, MOSCOW, SALEM. Beneath the heading the purchases were itemised.

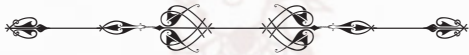
1. South Sea Pearl bracelet with platinum clasp, 420 Galleons
2. Freshwater Pearl bracelet with gold clasp, 10 Galleons

Fleur let the bill of sale flutter back to the desktop and she sat back, filled with self-satisfaction. South Sea pearls! Fleur was not a great fan of pearls, feeling that they were rather old-fashioned; she found that she preferred gemstones, such as the emeralds which Snape had given her as an engagement gift. However, she was very much the daughter of Hélène Delacour and had been educated from a young age regarding the grades of all manner of jewellery, so that she would be able to distinguish the



superior from the merely excellent. Undoubtedly, the lavish bauble was a gift for her. Snape might be a rather cold man, physically speaking, but he obviously adored her — a man did not buy such expensive gifts where he did not love! And the other item — the freshwater pearl bracelet — was undoubtedly for one of his sisters. Perhaps for Shadow; such an ornament would be appropriate for a girl in her first season. Or, it could even be for Stormy! A grown-up gift to encourage the child to move willingly away from her toys to the trappings of girlhood.

Lost in her happy daydreams, the Frenchwoman was unaware of the watchful eyes of the house-elf peering at her from around the bookcase on the far wall.



As they sat alone in the first floor sitting room that evening, Luna observed the desolation in Draco's eyes and took him in her arms, pressing his face against her breasts and lovingly stroking his hair. She began gently to rock her torso, as if she were quieting a crying baby, crooning to him in wordless melody.

Surrendering himself to the irresistible comfort he found within her, Draco clung, raising his face at last to murmur to her, "I don't want to wait any more, Luna. I need you *now*."

Luna's brow furrowed as she tilted her head to look



down into his face. "Professor McGonagall will know, Draco. We don't dare — not here." She thought for a moment, her fingers drawing through the hair at his nape repeatedly in a soothing gesture. "We could go to the Manor, I suppose," she added.

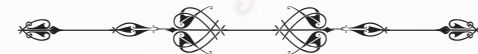
Draco straightened from her embrace, pulling her instead against his chest and pressing an urgent, burning kiss to her lips. When she was trembling against him, he moved his lips to her ear. "I love you so much, Luna — and I don't want to wait. I want to be married, now. Tell me you want it, too."

Luna pulled back from him, looking seriously into his grey eyes. "We have to go tell Daddy what we're going to do," she said, standing and holding her hand out to him.

"You mean *ask* him," Draco corrected, standing as well.

"No. I mean *tell* him. If we marry tomorrow, will that be soon enough?"

The look of adoration in his eyes nearly robbed her of breath. "It will have to do," he said huskily, clasping her to him in a desperate embrace.



Hermione knocked on Sophronia's bedroom door the next morning and waited for the invitation before entering.

"Good morning, Hermione," Sophronia said warmly, rising from her place at her writing desk to embrace the



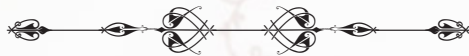
girl. "Please, sit with me."

Hermione took the chair to one side of the desk. "You asked for a favour."

Sophronia retrieved a piece of parchment, tinted a delicate shade of blue, and placed it in Hermione's hand. "I have some shopping that needs to be done for wedding gifts, but with Skye's engagement, I suddenly have many other appointments to keep, as well. I was wondering if you could go to these shops and procure these items. They are just gifts for Neville and Pansy, Draco and Luna, and a few things for Skye and Bill. I hate to ask you, but it would be such a help to me, if you would not object, Hermione."

Hermione read through the list. "This will not be difficult at all, Sophronia; I'll be more than happy to help. Is this all?"

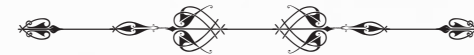
Sophronia nodded and watched the girl go, wondering why Severus continued to give her things, such as gifts and errands, to pass on to Hermione.



Dobby and Winky had been given instructions from Professor Snape to keep him constantly informed of the comings and goings of Miss Hermione. They were not allowed to tell anyone that they were reporting her movements to him. But the oddest thing of all was that every time they told him she was leaving the house, he left, as well.



It was a rather solemn group who gathered at the Ministry just after noon to witness the binding of Draco Malfoy and Luna Lovegood. Luna's father seemed to be unable to stop the tears from tracking down his cheeks; he appeared quite grateful for the kindness shown to him by Harry Potter and Pansy Parkinson, who teamed up to keep him supplied with fresh handkerchiefs. Professor Snape lent dignity to the proceedings, his silent figure in his black clothing striking a fitting contrast to the bride and groom, both of whom were dressed in the traditional white garb of a binding. Luna looked like a wood-elf with the flowery wreath in her hair, whilst Draco resembled nothing so much as a fairytale prince; the two had eyes for no one else. Neville Longbottom stood with Draco and Ginevra Weasley stood with Luna as they spoke their vows. Afterwards, Professor Snape treated them all to a champagne lunch at a nearby hotel before the happy couple Disapparated away to Malfoy Manor. Though Harry and Neville agreed that they would not care to have Snape as the benefactor of their nuptials, Draco was obviously grateful for the professor's presence. There was simply no accounting for tastes.



Snape settled in his favourite armchair in the green parlour at his club, a glass of burgundy on the table before him and the latest edition of *Potioneer Quarterly* open across his lap. Upon his return to Grimmauld Place, the house-elves had informed him that Miss Hermione was running errands for the mistress, so he promptly deserted the house in favour of the Cave. The house-elves at the club welcomed him, assuring him that his now standing orders would be enforced: if anyone were to Floo for him or to come to the club inquiring for him, they were to be told he was not there.

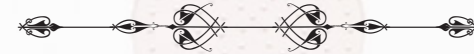
Thus far, his plans were going well. Nanny reported that Fleur had found the receipts for the jewellery. He simply had to keep the pressure on, and continue with the periodic revelations, deceptions, and belittlements. His strategy was sound, based entirely upon the psychology of his subject.

How much could she take? And how long would it take? His mind was constantly reviewing his plot, wondering if there was something more he could do, or, worse, something he had missed that would prevent the plan from succeeding. Time was ticking on and with each passing hour, his unease grew, knowing that subtlety is best, but that it does not perform on a schedule.

Gazing out the window to Diagon Alley, he allowed himself a moment to grieve the presence of his acerbic

friend, whose commentary on life had been a source of perpetual amusement to him these past twenty years. The absence of Lucius in his life highlighted the need for a companion to whom he could speak of all manner of things — an intelligent friend.

Hermione Granger emerged from a shop beneath Snape's window perch, her arms burdened with Sophronia's purchases, entirely unaware of his scrutiny.



The excitement at the breakfast table the next morning amongst the young women was palpable. Skye had her appointment at Madam Malkin's shop that morning, and all of her friends were going with her to help her choose her wedding finery. Though the wedding was planned for December, it was important to begin to order things early; all of the shopkeepers providing the wizarding community with the minutiae of binding ceremonies were up to their eyeballs in custom.

Snape sat in his habitual morning silence, shielded from the chattering females by his newspaper and soothing his nerves with strong coffee. At the opposite end of the table, Sirius Black sat with an amused smile on his lips.

Sophronia watched Sirius with a slightly guilty mien; he had not been blessed with much of her attention since

they had returned to Grimmauld Place, and she felt rather badly about neglecting him. She had requested Winky to prepare his favourite kippers for breakfast this morning, to make it up to him that she was rushing off, yet again, and leaving him to amuse himself.

"I do not know how long we will be out," she murmured to him before leaving the table. "It can be quite time-consuming for a girl to choose her wedding robes."

The young ladies streamed away from the table, chattering to one another. Stormy looked after them, a frown on her face.

"Why *can't* I go? I want to see Skye's wedding dress."

Minerva McGonagall left her chair and approached Stormy, one hand held out invitingly. "But I need your assistance today, Stormy. Won't you stay and help me?"

Stormy obediently took the proffered hand. "Truly, Auntie Min?"

"Oh yes, my dear. I cannot possibly manage without you."

Sophronia smiled fondly after the old lady and her eight year old companion as they left the room, then covered Sirius' hand with her own. "I must away, but please take your time and finish your breakfast, Siri — Winky made it especially for you."

"Don't mind me, Sophie," Sirius told her, raising her hand to press a kiss to her knuckles. "I'll see you tonight."

Sophronia gave him one last smile before whisking out of the room.

Sirius watched her until he could no longer see her, and then he became aware of Snape's sour look trained upon him. The two old enemies faced one another from opposite ends of the dining table.

"I sincerely hope you do not mean to muck it up, this time," Snape grouched.

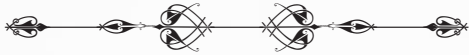
Sirius quelled the urge to make a smart retort and reminded himself that this man considered himself to be responsible for Sophie, as well as for her daughters. They would be forever bound by the girls, who would be Sirius' stepchildren, in addition to being Snape's sisters. It would benefit him to seek peace with Snape, no matter how much it galled him to do so. Their history had been a bitter jockeying for position since they were eleven years old, but Sirius was ready to put it aside in favour of the happiness he had found with Sophie.

"I don't intend to let her get away again," Sirius said. "I made many mistakes in my youth that I will always regret."

Grey eyes held black ones as the two men considered one another, each wondering if the other were sincere, and each also knowing that this bridge had to be crossed, for Stormy's sake, if for no other reason.

Snape slowly nodded at the scope of these words. "I

suppose we all have,” he allowed, returning his attention to his newspaper, while Sirius attacked his kippers with renewed gusto.



Snape had just settled himself in the library when Dobby interrupted him.

“Dobby is sorry to disturb the professor, Sir, but Miss Fleur is waiting for Sir in the sitting room.”

When Snape joined Fleur in the first floor sitting room, she was sitting with Shadow and was full of news.

“Have you heard, Severus? The Ministry of Magic has banned Apparition in the London area until further notice! It will be just as it was in the last days of the war!”

Fleur handed him a Special Edition of the DAILY PROPHET which contained the surprising information. Scanning the newspaper, Snape emitted a dark chuckle. “The dunder-heads were not capable of rounding up all of the Death Eaters after the war, and were entirely unable to protect my family from the machinations of Alverard, yet now that the Order has cleaned up the mess for them, they are getting all wound up about things.” He tossed the paper onto the coffee table, a pronounced sneer on his face. “Fools.”

The doorbell chimed and they were soon joined by Percy Weasley, who bustled in, full of importance. “The Ministry has



found a nest of Death Eaters in Kent!” he reported excitedly.

“They have *not*,” Snape retorted, leaning his shoulder against the mantelpiece, regarding Percy with derision. “They have found Alverard’s mother sitting in the middle of a pile of smashed china knick-knacks, recovering from a prolonged period of control under the Imperius Curse. There is not a word about additional Death Eaters being captured.”

Percy scowled. “I imagine that Ministry officials might have information which they do not care to share with *you*, Professor Snape.”

Snape quirked an eyebrow, willing to settle back and entertain himself with a bit of Percy-baiting. Fleur, recognising the signs, hurried to intercede. Affirming to Percy that they would be sure to tell Hermione he had called to see her, she personally escorted him down to the door.

“The Ministry *could* have information which they did not give to the DAILY PROPHET,” she said to Snape when she returned, her tone chastising.

“My dear Fleur, I assure you that Percy Weasley could not possibly know anything about the Death Eaters that I do not know, regardless of his high placement in the Ministry of Magic.”

Fleur pressed her lips together, her displeasure evident. “I do not like to see you making fun of someone simply for being of a serious disposition.”

“I have no opposition to seriousness; it is pomposity



which I find objectionable,” he returned dryly.

Shadow was recounting the story to Hermione later that afternoon when Snape stopped in the doorway to listen.

“Severus was just getting comfortable, settling in to really needle Percy for a while, when Fleur hustled him out of here,” Shadow said, and Hermione looked across the room to lock eyes with Snape, the amusement in his face matching the merriment in hers. For the first time in weeks, they shared a moment that seemed to put them right back in their easy days of camaraderie at the Estuary.

“Poor Percy,” Hermione said, her voice full of laughter.

Snape quirked an eyebrow and scoffed. “He deserves what he gets.”

Shadow, watching the strange byplay between her brother and Hermione, reminded them of her presence by saying, “Well, Fleur certainly seems to agree with him about things.”

Hermione looked away from Snape, gaping comically at Shadow. “Percy and Fleur! They would be *perfect* for one another. Now, why did I not think of that before?”

Snape growled from the doorway. “Perhaps it was because you recalled that Miss Delacour is betrothed to *me*?”

Hermione returned her attention to Snape, a look of mock thoughtfulness upon her face. “No, I don’t *think* that was the reason.”

Snape walked away from the impertinent girl, incensed.

The next morning, Sophronia asked Hermione to pop out to the shops and pick up a set of crystal goblets as a wedding gift for Neville and Pansy. As soon as Hermione was gone, Snape hastened to the Cave. Thus it was, for the third time that week, that when Fleur called in Grimmauld Place asking for Snape, she was told he was out.

“Professor Snape said he was going to his club, Miss,” Dobby reported dutifully.

Fleur narrowed her eyes. “Yet when I Floo for him at the club, he is never there,” she said. “Is Miss Granger in?”

Dobby answered as he had been instructed. “No, Miss Granger left when the Professor did.”

With a sniff of indignation, Fleur marched to the Floo in the sitting room, emerging in Severus’ bedroom at the Estuary. Hearing movement just beyond the door, she opened the door to investigate, staring in amazement as strangers dressed in workman’s garb proceeded along the corridor, carrying a huge mahogany bookcase on a Muggle trolley. Intrigued, she watched them go to the very end of the corridor, where they carefully manoeuvred the monolithic furnishing through the doorway of the room there. When the workmen disappeared into the room, she crept down the hallway and peeked.

Here, then, was a truly proper bedchamber for the master of the Estuary! A sitting area occupied the space near the door, leading one to the centre of the room. To the right of centre was the marble fireplace, and to the left was the focus of the room: a massive four-poster bed, residing on a dais. The duvet and the hangings were of a peculiar shade — the colour of flame — which she was certain she had recently seen before. Creeping further into the room, she saw a dressing room to the left, furnished in green and silver; the chamber to the right was a dressing room as well, decorated all in crimson and gold. It was fitted with an elaborate dressing table laid with a beautiful vanity set, including a hand mirror, brush, and combs, each bearing a monogram in tiny rubies. She could clearly discern the “S” in the middle, but she was still straining to see the “F” and “D” of the monogram when she was startled by Nanny.

“Did Miss get lost?” the old nurse inquired tartly.

“Whose room is this, Nanny?” Fleur asked, ignoring the taunt.

“This was the master’s father’s room, Miss.”

“Why hasn’t Severus moved to this room?”

Nanny cast Fleur a glance from the corner of her eye.

“Perhaps Miss should speak to Master about that.”

“You may be sure I will!” the Frenchwoman exclaimed.

The workmen emerged from a doorway at the far end of the room through which Fleur had not yet looked; when they spied Nanny, they pulled their caps off their heads and stood straight.

“We got the bookcase installed, Nanny,” one man said nervously.

“Did you mark the walls moving it in?” Nanny demanded.


“No, we didn’t use magic — we moved it by hand, just like you said!” the speaker insisted.

Pushing past the tiny house-elf, Fleur went and looked into the room in question. It was nothing special — it contained a loveseat, an enormous armchair which looked big enough to hold two adults, a chaise lounge, littered with cushions — and floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall bookcases. What a peculiar room! It looked like some bookworm’s idea of heaven. She frowned, her eye on the loveseat. Heaven for *two*, it would appear.

“Nanny, what is this?”


The workmen were filing out as Nanny answered from across the room. “Nanny is not nosing into the Master’s business, and Miss ought not to be nosy, either,” she replied firmly.

Huffing her annoyance, Fleur walked out of the mysterious master bedchamber and went back down the corridor to Severus’ room, entering and closing the door behind her, shutting Nanny out.



Shaking open the folds of the DAILY PROPHECY, Snape thought of the new bills he had given to Nanny to be scattered over his desktop at the Estuary. How much longer could Fleur hold up under the relentless strain?


With a smirk, Snape permitted himself to dwell upon the renovations currently taking place in the master suite at the Estuary — a room in which he did *not* intend to sleep alone.



Fleur trod through Snape's bedroom, questions running through her mind. Why was Severus renovating the master suite if he did not intend to occupy it? Perhaps he was doing it as a surprise for her? But why would he incur the expenditure of decorating that room as well as the one next door to this?

Shaking her head in confusion, she slipped into his study for her now daily perusal of the papers left on his desktop. Apparently the house-elves left bills that were delivered to the house beneath the blotter for Severus to inspect at his convenience. She was surprised to see such a large number of invoices this time and she seated herself at his desk to look through them.

How odd! Most of the receipts were for household fur-



nishings and such. A full set of linens, from bed sheets to tablecloths, bought from the linen draper's shop in Diagon Alley. Next was a set of monogrammed glassware, from juice glasses to brandy snifters, followed by a full service of silverware, in the traditional Nimue pattern. A smile touched her lips. It appeared that Severus was procuring all-new furnishings for their quarters at Hogwarts — what a lovely surprise that would be! — and she would certainly feign shock when he showed it all to her, after their honeymoon.

As she read the next bill of sale, Fleur felt the smile slide from her face.

A five-room flat, complete with all modern conveniences, situated in the coveted address of Potter Place, off Diagon Alley, had been purchased by one Severus Snape. Fleur had seen that building, full of professional people and young married couples. She and Severus certainly had no need for such a place! They would divide their time between Hogwarts and the Estuary.

Her mouth set in a grim line, Fleur began to thumb through the other bills, seeing the purchases in a whole new light. These things were to furnish this flat in Potter Place! Was he setting up a hideaway so that he could avoid living with his new bride?

Glaring at the sales slips as if she could find the answer

to her difficulty there, Fleur noticed the signature at the bottom of the linen draper's bill, and then she looked for, and found, the same signature on each of the others.

Hermione Granger.

Fleur let the bills fall from her nerveless fingers as she flung away from the desk and began to pace, her brain a seething cauldron of rage. They must be having an affair now, and planning to continue after Severus and Fleur were married. But how could that be? Granger had to marry before the end of the year, just as everyone else did. Had she found an imbecile to marry who would not notice he was being cuckolded from the very beginning? Why would Severus offer for Fleur if it was Granger he wanted? Perhaps the affair had begun during their mutual incarceration at the Estuary.

Finding that she was suddenly chilled to the bone, Fleur collapsed onto the small leather sofa against the wall, pulling the crocheted throw from the back of the seat and wrapping it around her shoulders. She needed a plan. She simply had to keep a cool head and the situation could be managed. Granger would become another man's wife and in the novelty of her new life, she would lose interest in Severus. In the meantime, Severus and Fleur would marry, and she would have the opportunity to use the ancient Veela magic to bind him to her sexually, dim-

ming his taste for other women.

Above all, she could not permit this engagement to end — she would not be the laughingstock of London again, as she had been when Bill Weasley jilted her. She would go through with this marriage, and find ways to punish those who crossed her.



This time, Nanny allowed herself to be seen as she pretended to hide behind the bookshelf, watching the Master's fiancée. Let the girl realise that she would never have a moment's peace living in a home where the servants spied upon her and reported her every movement to their master.



There was a ball at the Ministry assembly rooms that night and the young ladies of Grimmauld Place were busily dressing for the event, scurrying from room to room, borrowing things and helping one another with the arrangement of hair and makeup. Snape loitered in the first floor sitting room, ostensibly drinking a glass of after-dinner port. Tonight Sophronia was chaperoning the young women to their gathering; the inclusion of Black, Lupin, and Bill Weasley in the party certainly made his presence superfluous.

Miss Granger was the first person down the steps; she paused when she noted Snape's eyes on her as she entered the sitting room. He stood near the hearth, the glass of port at his lips, and her shy gaze skittered over his form as a charming blush rose to her cheeks. She wore a sheath of shimmering satin the colour of candlelight, her dark curls charmed to those alluring corkscrews which tumbled in a cascade down her back.

"Which of your cavaliers shall we see tonight?" he demanded roughly.

She tilted her head to one side, exposing the column of her throat to his hungry eyes. "We're going with the Phoenix House men, Professor," she answered softly.

"Ah," he said snidely. "Lupin, then."

She blinked once at his unkind tone and her stubborn chin came up defiantly. "Yes, Remus," she said, stressing Lupin's given name.

Snape placed the glass of wine on the mantel with enough force to snap the stem of a lesser piece of crystal. "How big of a fool do you take me for, Miss Granger?" he inquired, his smooth tone belied by the fire in his eyes. "You and Lupin have no serious intentions regarding one another."

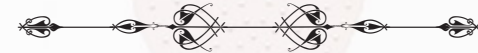
Squaring her shoulders to his challenge, Hermione tossed her head and forced a light laugh. "I am no judge of how big a fool you might be, Professor — but you could

not be more wrong about Remus and me."

Sophronia and Skye entered the room, each with a smile and a greeting for Snape. Sophronia turned her smile on Hermione. "And doesn't Hermione look pretty tonight, Severus?"

Snape rapped out, "I am *no judge* of such matters, Sophronia. Good evening."

And with a bow in their direction, Snape stalked out of the room.



As was usual for the Ministry balls, the rooms were overcrowded. After escaping from a second dance with Percy Weasley, Hermione smiled when she saw Healer Howser approaching her. "Good evening, Healer," she said cheerfully.

The Healer took her hand and smiled down at her. "I thought you were going to call me Douglas." He nodded towards the dance floor. "Shall we?"

Willingly, Hermione stepped into his arms as the soft music began to play. After a moment, the Healer spoke.

"How is our patient?"

"Oh, he is well enough to be as unpleasant as he's ever been," she replied with a touch of bitterness.

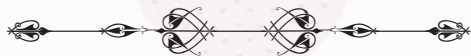
"You know, Miss Granger, ever since that night we sat up with him in the hospital, I've been curious," Howser confessed.

Hermione frowned. "Curious about what?"

"I can't understand why he's engaged to that other woman when you love him so much."

Hermione flushed and averted her face, not knowing how to answer him.

"I don't mean to pry, Miss Granger — but it seems such a waste of an intelligent, lovely girl." Douglas Howser continued to look down at the bent head with his kind eyes, but his partner did not meet his gaze. When the song ended, she excused herself with some confusion, and was gone.



Snape looked up in surprise at the knock on the library door. "Come," he said.

Ronald Weasley entered. "Fancy a game, Professor?"

Snape agreed and the two men settled across the board from one another. Snape, whose turn it was to play white, moved a pawn and sat back, watching the younger man's face. "I expected you to be at the Ministry do tonight," he said.

"Oh, I wasn't in the mood for it," Ron said, moving a pawn in counter.

"Is not Shadow in the first floor sitting room?" Snape inquired, moving his knight out.

"I think she's up in the ladies' sitting room with Professor McGonagall," Ron answered, moving to take Snape's



knight with his bishop.

Several moments passed in silence before Ron glanced up to find the professor's unsettling gaze fastened to his face. "It's your move, sir," Ron said nervously.

"No, it is *your* move, Mr. Weasley. Is there not something which you wish to discuss?"

Ron gaped, his mouth suddenly bone dry.

Snape stood, indicating the bottles on the sideboard. "Perhaps you would care for a drink?"

Ron watched Snape's hand hover over the drinks tray, remembering how Shadow had hated the smell of spirits upon his breath. "Butterbeer," he croaked.

"Of course," Snape returned, pouring a measure of brandy for himself. "Dobby!"

Dobby popped into the room, bowing low. "How can Dobby serve the Professor?"

"Fetch a Butterbeer for Mr. Weasley, Dobby. Then, in about twenty minutes, have Miss Shadow join us here."

In short order, Ron found himself facing Shadow's guardian across a table, each of them with their drink of choice in hand. Realising that it was finally time to make a push for his future, Ron took a swallow of Butterbeer and began to speak, praying that he would remember everything he had discussed with Sirius and Harry about this conversation.

"Professor, I know that Shadow is only sixteen years



old, but we love one another, and we wish to enter into a binding engagement. I am perfectly happy to wait until she leaves school for us to be married. As for me, I begin Auror training in January; I will have a profession, and I will be able to provide for her.”

Snape had listened to Ron with unnerving concentration; now he spoke very quietly. “If you had come to me with this request before the battle at the Estuary, I would not have been tempted to give my permission for this mad scheme — regardless of Sophronia’s endorsement of your plan.”

Ron stared at him, unbreathing, scarcely able to register the words Snape was speaking.

“In the battle, however, you proved to me once and for all that you are a powerful wizard who is prepared to lay down his life for my sister. Sophronia and I both feel reservations because of Shadow’s age, but we also recognise that the two of you have demonstrated significant love and loyalty towards one another. We have decided to give our permission for your betrothal.” At Ron’s exhalation of the breath he had been holding, Snape raised a hand for silence. “Keep in mind that she is, indeed, only sixteen, Mr. Weasley. She becomes a legal adult once the contract is signed, and I will have no lawful recourse in regards to her behaviour, but I am depending upon you to keep *your* conduct in the proper bounds for a schoolgirl.”

When Shadow hesitantly entered the library a few moments later, it was to find her beloved on his feet, shaking the hand of her fearsome brother, and grinning hugely.

Snape turned to his middle sister and held out an imperious hand to her. “Do you wish to marry this man, Shadow?” he asked as she slipped her hand into his.

“More than anything, Severus,” she whispered, scarcely able to believe this was happening.

Snape placed Shadow’s small hand into Ron’s much larger one. “Then you may plan your wedding for the summer two years hence, when you will have finished school, Shadow.”

Shadow threw her arms about the unyielding body of her big brother, tears streaming freely down her face. “Thank you, Severus — oh, *thank you!*”

Snape removed a handkerchief from his pocket and unceremoniously dried her cheeks. “You had best behave yourself and work hard at school; I shall be watching you! The number of weekend passes to Hogsmeade you receive will be directly tied to your marks.”

Knowing that her Hogsmeade weekends would be her chance to see her boyfriend, she turned to Ron indignantly. “How can he do that?”

Ron smiled at her. “Your Head of House has all kinds of power over you, love.”

Shadow glared at her brother. "Then I hope I'm sorted into Gryffindor!"

Snape rolled his eyes and handed the handkerchief into Ron's hand. "Take her out of here before I change my mind, Ronald."



On Saturday morning, Healer Howser at last ran his quarry to earth in the green parlour on the upper level of the Cave.

"Just the man I was looking for," he said with a smile, advancing into the room where Severus Snape sat in the window embrasure with his tea and newspaper.

"Imagine my delight," Snape said, eyeing the Healer over his teacup. "Did I fail to pay your bill?"

Howser broke out into a laugh. "You are such a delightful fellow; it's no wonder that the beautiful women want you."

Snape's answering sneer was a formidable sight. "Say whatever it is and get out, Howser."

"I was there when she brought you in, you know. Holding you in her arms, covered in your blood, frantically demanding the emergency team to stop everything and look after you. 'This is Professor Severus Snape,' she said, glaring us all down. 'Every person in this room owes their freedom to the deeds of this man. Stop what you are doing *instantly* and attend to him!' I had never seen anything as magnificent as



she was. And then the way she sat at your side all night long, talking to you as if you could hear her..."

Douglas sat down across from his former Potions master and looked him in the eye. "I'm trying to figure out why a terrific girl like Hermione Granger is pining over you when you are patently unavailable, and when there are plenty of men who would give their wand arms to have such a clever, pretty woman for their own."

Snape placed the teacup back in its saucer with immeasurable delicacy, his fathomless black eyes never wavering from the Healer's good-natured face. "No doubt you count yourself amongst their number."

Howser steeled himself to hold the older wizard's gaze. "I do."

Snape studied Howser in a leisurely manner, taking the cloth napkin from his lap and patting his lips unnecessarily, determining how he wished to answer. At length, he spoke. "You may be assured that I am aware of the situation and that matters are being... arranged. Your assistance is not required, Healer Howser. If, by chance, any of us, including Miss Granger, should find ourselves in need of a Healer, we would not hesitate to call upon your unparalleled skills. For now, however, any further attention on your part is unwarranted and unwelcome."

Snape then picked up his newspaper and began to read as if he were in the room alone.



That evening, Snape strolled along to Sophronia's room and knocked, awaiting her invitation to enter.

"You look quite handsome, Severus," his stepmother said, surveying him in his severe formal attire, adorned with his Order of Merlin.

Snape nodded his thanks to her before coming to the reason for his visit. "Sophronia, could you persuade Miss Granger to wear the bracelet this evening?"

Sophronia stood from her dressing table, her sequined gown of aquamarine-blue flowing about her.

"Good heavens, woman, no one will look at the bride!" he murmured, momentarily distracted by her stunning beauty.

Sophronia smiled a genuine smile; she could not recall another time when Severus had responded to her as if she were actually a woman, rather than his father's wife. "I'm sure that Pansy will be a beautiful bride, and that all eyes will be on her," she demurred, approaching him. "I will take the bracelet to Hermione while she is dressing and ask her to wear it tonight. But I wonder why you would wish for her to do so?"

Severus gave her a mild look. "I think it is an appropriate ornament for a young woman to wear to a wedding, don't you agree?"

Sophronia crossed her arms. "You're up to something, aren't you?"

Snape looked her up and down once before replying, "I could say the same to you."

A roguish dimple appeared in Sophronia's cheek as her laugh floated in the air. "But I'm not asking you to assist me in my scheme," she pointed out irrepressibly.

"Minx," he muttered, turning to go. He paused in the doorway. "Will you do it?"

"Yes, you impossible man, but just this once — and then nothing more until you tell me what you're up to!"

With a genuine grin, the likes of which she had never seen grace his face, he replied, "I will be happy to let you in on the secret, as soon as I discover what it is."

As Sophronia had prophesied, Pansy was indeed a very pretty bride, and all eyes were on her as she pledged herself to Neville, whose responses were spoken in a firm, deep voice which thrilled his bride and amazed his friends.

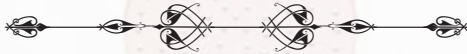
Only Sirius seemed unable to keep his eyes from Sophronia in her eye-catching aquamarine gown.

"How much longer do you mean to keep me waiting?" he growled into her ear as they eased into the first dance at Neville and Pansy's reception. "We have not only Skye,

but Shadow settled as well.”

Sophonra tilted her head back and treated him to a come-on look such as he had not received from her since she was seventeen years old. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, Mr. Black,” she said, turning her cheek to his shoulder with a wicked smile.

Sirius tightened his hold on her, twirling her in the dance, his mind in a fog of such longing he could not think straight.



Fleur circled the dance floor in the arms of her fiancé, her mind a muddle of confusion. When he had called for her at her home, producing from his pocket a jewellers’ case of burgundy grosgrain, her spirits had lifted. She knew what gift he had procured for her, and the expenditure of more than four hundred Galleons was surely a declaration of love.

Snapping the box open, she had been astonished to see an insipid bracelet of freshwater pearls. If she had not been so afraid, she would have been insulted.

“Do you not like it?” Snape had inquired with apparent concern.

He must be planning to give her the South Sea pearls for a wedding gift, she thought to herself, scrambling desperately to make sense of this slighting gift of inferior quality.

“Will you fasten it for me?” she had asked, offering her



wrist to him.

Now that wrist rested properly on his shoulder, the pathetic bracelet mocking her. She was having a difficult time diverting her attention from the puzzle of the bracelets.

From the corner of her eye, she spied Draco and Luna Malfoy, arms about one another, in conversation with Varen Vector.

“I read about Draco’s marriage in the DAILY PROPHET,” she said, attempting to modulate her voice so that her tone would be light and unconcerned. “You were listed amongst the guests.”

“Yes,” he responded indifferently.

“You never mentioned to me that you were at Draco’s wedding.”

“What concern is that of yours?” he inquired unpleasantly. “Do tell me that you are not planning to be a tiresome wife who is forever demanding where her husband has been?”

The song came to an end and Fleur pulled out of his arms. “I’m sure that your whereabouts will not be hard to determine,” she said tightly, before walking away from him into the milling guests.



Tonks moved her head away from Viktor, irritated by his incessant whispering of sweet nothings into her ear



as they danced. She had meant to accept his offer tonight, thinking that she would be more likely to wish to do so whilst in attendance at a wedding, but the sight of the rapturously happy Neville and Pansy had done nothing to inspire her to want Viktor. He was more sullen-looking than Severus Snape, he had less attractive features, and his walk was distinctly duck-footed. Furthermore, tonight he smelled of elderberries, and nothing made her more nauseous than elderberry wine-breath.

Wistfully, her gaze followed Remus and Hermione, who danced together nearby. Remus had not gone to visit Hermione when she was staying at the Estuary, and Tonks had taken heart at that. Of course, he may have been avoiding the unpleasantness of Severus, which could be a huge deterrent for anyone — but Tonks chose to believe that Remus simply was not so powerfully drawn to Hermione that he could not bear to be separated from her.

It gave her some hope to cling to.



The dance ended and Remus and Hermione drifted over to the refreshment table, where Remus was grabbed by Professor Vector.

“They’re playing the rock and roll medley next, Remus,” Varen said, sounding a bit drunk. “I need a partner who



can do the Twist, and Lucius isn’t *here*.”

Lupin put a comforting arm about Varen’s shoulders. “You’ll excuse me, won’t you, Hermione?”

Hermione nodded, looking after the unhappy Professor Vector sadly. Remus had told her that Varen Vector had carried a torch for Lucius Malfoy since she was a student at Hogwarts; she must be grieving his death more than most.

“You!”

Hermione heard the exclamation, full of more hatred than she was aware could be packed into one word, and turned slowly to find Fleur Delacour staring at her — or, actually, staring at the bracelet on her wrist.

“Good evening, Miss Delacour,” Hermione said politely.

“How dare you show yourself in public wearing *that!*” Fleur raged, one outflung hand indicating Hermione’s person.

Hermione looked down at her little black dress, then back at Fleur with a placating smile. “Oh, the invitation specified that either wizard or Muggle dress was appropriate,” she said.

Fleur stared at the four hundred Galleon South Sea pearl bracelet encircling Granger’s wrist, her wrath mounting insensibly. “You’re not fooling anyone with your innocent act!” Fleur spat. “I am well aware of what is going on!”

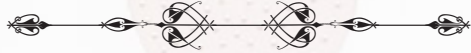
Hermione stood uncertainly by the punch bowl, her face a study in bewilderment as she watched the other



witch with increasing alarm. Was Fleur about to flip out in the middle of Neville's wedding reception? Did she need to let someone know that Fleur was losing her mind?

Taking one step closer to Hermione, Fleur said, "I am on to you, Granger. Find another relationship to wreck."

Tossing her curtain of hair so that it flew about her like silvery ribbons, Fleur turned on her heel and walked away, feeling that she had dealt with that little problem with commendable efficiency.



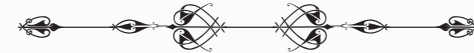
Tonks kicked off her satin sandals and collapsed in the armchair by her bed, rubbing her toes and uttering little whimpering moans of relief. Why did women wear such uncomfortable shoes, anyway?

She had set Viktor down as gently as she could, standing with him in the back garden at Grimmauld Place, her great, dark eyes entreating him to understand. He had accepted her refusal stoically, ever the gentleman, and retrieved his broom from the garden shed, flying off into the starry night sky with the grace he could never exhibit on his own two feet.

Now she had cleared her own playing field; it was time to swallow her stupid pride and to go to Remus with her heart in her hands, begging him to reconsider. She would do so at the first opportunity.



Smiling as she pulled her nightdress over her head, she allowed herself to drift to sleep, dreaming of her werewolf lover.



Sirius shrugged out of his dress robes, tossing them on a nearby chair, and slipped beneath the covers of his bed. As he punched the pillow into shape, he pondered Sophie's behaviour that evening. Never had she been so enticing; her entire attention had been focussed upon him. In that glittering dress, exactly the colour of her bluebell eyes, she had been like Circe herself, luring him onto the shoals. He would have followed her anywhere.

So, why was he alone in his bedroom at Phoenix House?

As if in answer to his question, there was a knock upon his door.

"Come in," he said, wondering which of the boys needed him tonight.

Sophonra entered his bedroom, the ethereal blue of her negligee floating about her body as she moved to close the door.

"Sophie!"

Sirius started up, then stopped, mindful of his state of undress.

"Sophie, you shouldn't be here."



Without speaking, his angel crossed the bedroom floor, removing the gauzy robe of the ensemble and letting it drift to the floor like a falling mist. The moonlight pierced the curtains over the window, and Sophie swept the curtains open, allowing the moonlight to flood the second floor bedroom, unmindful of how the beams of light illuminated the curves of her body to the awestruck Sirius.

Wielding her wand, the goddess before him spoke a spell to extinguish the candles, leaving them alone with the knowing moonlight. He watched, spellbound, as she lifted her arms, drawing the gown over her head and letting it, too, fall unheeded to the floor. She stood before him then, completely bare to his scrutiny, offering all that she had.

Rising from the bed, Sirius stood before her as well, each of them naked as the day they were born. Even with the fascination they each felt for the other's body, it was their eyes which could not be parted as their hands came together and their fingers entwined.

"Dear God, but I love you, Sophie," he said.

"And I love you, Siri — I have never loved any man except for you."

He released one of her hands and brought those fingers to the porcelain of her cheek. "You understand there will be no going back from here?" he said, his attitude brooking no argument.

She nodded, her free hand rising to caress his bare back, his flesh seeming to burn beneath her fingers. "I understand, Siri."

He stepped back, getting into the bed and moving to the middle, leaving a space for her to slide in beside him. She did so, her face flaming as his eyes raked over her body, his hunger for her evident. Coming to rest beside him, she lifted her wand, bringing the tip to her abdomen and beginning to murmur a contraceptive incantation.

Sirius grasped her wand arm tenderly, gently forcing the tip of the wand away from her body.

"No," he said, gazing deeply into her eyes, his tone questioning.

Sophonra let the wand drop over the side of the bed, moving surely into his arms. "Oh, yes, Siri," she breathed.



She lay dozing against his chest, her golden hair a tumbled mass of glory against her petal soft skin. Sirius divided his attention between the wonder of her in his bed, and watching as the moonlight faded into day, and the sun rose. He could not help but reflect upon the vagaries of fate, which had taken her from him before he properly knew how to appreciate her, and brought her back again when he was prepared to spend the rest of his life endeavouring to deserve her.

The drugged look with which she had clung to him in the aftermath of their coupling had answered one question he had about her relationship with her husband; her amazed, "People do it more than once?" had answered another for him, as he worked to bring that expression of magnificent intoxication to her face again.

As the rosy rays of sunlight invaded the room, Sirius bent his shaggy head to press feather-light kisses upon her eyelids.

"Wake up, Sophie. It's your wedding day."

SOPHRONIA HURRIEDLY slipped her shoes on and paused for a quick glance in the mirror. Thankfully, the love bite on her shoulder was far enough to one side that it did not show at her collar. Really, Sirius was going to have to remember that they were not teenagers! She could not be wandering around like a foolish child, with stars in her eyes and love bites on her neck!

A singularly silly smile crossed her face as her mind wandered to the things he had said to her as he moved over her, making her feel things of which

she had only ever read... had never, in her wildest dreams, expected to experience...

"Mum?"

Sophonria started guiltily, giving her hair one final pat before turning to smile at Skye.

"Are you all ready to go?" she inquired, going to give her eldest child a swift embrace.

Skye smiled nervously. "We're ready." The lovely girl, so like her mother, looked anxious. "Do you think that Bill's mother will like me?"

Sophonria put an arm about Skye's shoulder, walking slowly with her from the bedroom. "I met her at tea one day, and I liked her very much. She is a busy woman with a large family, love. Keep in mind that she might be quite occupied right now with all the weddings she has to plan. But I truly do not see how she can fail to love you — you are a truly good person, and you love her son to distraction. I think that will count in your favour." They had reached the first floor sitting room, which they entered, to find Bill, Ron, and Harry standing with Shadow, Ginny, Hermione and Stormy.

"Is everyone packed? You have everything you need?" Sophronia asked them all.

The group nodded and hugs were exchanged as the travellers were bid farewell.

"I'll miss you," Stormy whispered brokenly to Skye as the older girl knelt to receive her sister's hug.

"I'll be back before you know it," she said, kissing the child upon the cheek.

Minerva McGonagall came into the room and placed loving hands on Stormy's shoulders as they watched the three Weasley siblings and their betrothed Floo to the Burrow.

"I hope you haven't forgotten that you've promised to go with me for a picnic at Richmond, today," McGonagall said to Stormy.

Stormy brightened visibly. "I haven't forgotten, Auntie Min!"

"Run along to my room and I shall join you there, shortly," the old woman said, watching with a small smile as the child skipped out of the sitting room.

"I'll keep her occupied," Minerva said softly to Sophronia, giving the younger witch a much more expansive, warm smile. "You go ahead, and don't give it another thought."

Hermione glanced curiously at Sophronia, who blushed. "Sirius and I have an errand to run in the city," she said.

Hermione just smiled and nodded. Good, Sophronia would be out of the house, as well.



Nanny came into the newly renovated master suite at the



Estuary, only to find her master observing himself in the mirror, turning his face from side to side, tilting his chin, as if trying to see himself from around his too-large nose.

"Is something wrong with Master's face?"

Snape started, pausing to glare down at the house-elf. "Nothing more than usual, Nanny; thank you for asking." He turned back again, resuming his examination; as he did so, he began to mutter, as if to himself. "She could have most any boy she wants — why me? What could she — what does she see in that?" He pointed to the scowling man in the mirror.

Nanny snorted. "The same thing *Nanny* sees, and Master would do well not to muck it up. Just be a man about it; accept it and remember to say, 'Thank you.'" Reminding herself belatedly that this man was no longer her nursing, Nanny adopted a more philosophical tone, adding, "We should not look a gift Hippogriff in the beak."

There was a note of uncertainty in his voice as he said, "But she must be suffering under a delusion of some sort. What will I do when her eyes clear and she sees me as I really am?" His bleak gaze was fastened on his reflection, his brow darkening with self-loathing.

Nanny's tone took on the soothing bustle of reassurance, all the while nudging him to move on. "She already has seen you as you really are, Master, and she is one of the



very few to have ever done so.”

Snape turned slightly to his left, as if to find his “good” side. “Well, I do not see it, but I suppose if *that* is what she desires,” he pointed once again at his countenance, “then *that* is what I shall try to obtain for her.”

Nanny responded in a tone of wry amusement. “A wise decision, Master; your generosity knows no bounds.”

Still riveted by his own reflection, Snape snarled, “Sarcasm is unbecoming in a house-elf, Nanny. Get out of here before I give you clothes!”

Nanny rolled her eyes. “As Master wishes.”

Hearing the *pop* of her departure, Snape at last turned from the mirror, his voice lowered to a musing mutter. “But the advantage still seems to be all on my side.”

His smile would have done Salazar Slytherin proud.



Hermione squared her shoulders and took a deep breath, then pushed open the door into the library, which was Snape’s sanctuary at Grimmauld Place. The desk he used sat to her left; behind it was a bookcase, the two lowest shelves of which contained those Dark Arts books which Snape considered to be safe enough to keep on display. To her right, in the far corner against the wall, was a cupboard which had attracted her attention before. The



cupboard was her objective.

Grabbing a straight chair, Hermione pulled it over to face the cupboard, and she sat down to consider her plan of attack.

If things had been going better, she would not be in here now, contemplating God-knows-what kind of havoc. The professor’s recent sneering challenge about her intentions towards Remus, and Remus’ towards her, was unsettling to her. If her proximity to and familiarity with Remus Lupin was no longer getting up Snape’s nose, it was time to take more decisive action. The idea she had in mind might move her ultimate plan along, and it certainly would resolve things for Remus.

On her part, it simply required pluck. She was not one to dwell upon problems which could not be remedied; there was almost *always* something to be done to bring about a favourable outcome. Occasionally the necessary actions would cause discomfort for herself or others for a short period of time, but the disquiet eventually passed and the end results were always worth the short-term distress.

Almost always.

Hermione closed her eyes and concentrated, going to a quiet place in her mind and feeling consciously for her magic, gathering it to her in a focussed beam of power.

Then she set about to bring down the wards Severus



Snape had placed on the cupboard containing the Dark Arts books he had locked away there.



Snape Flooded from the Estuary to the Leaky Cauldron, stepping down into the coffee room and brushing his clothes to remove the ashes. Nanny had suggested to him that he procure something of a more personal nature to leave the receipt for Fleur to find.

“What could be more personal than jewellery?” he had demanded.

“Lingerie,” Nanny replied baldly.

Snape’s mouth dropped open. “You expect me to buy *knickers* for Miss Granger?”

“There are many items of lingerie besides knickers, Master,” Nanny pointed out.

Snape stared at her blankly.

“Nightdresses,” Nanny explained patiently. “Negligees. Petticoats. Camisoles.”

Nanny may have continued to speak for some time; Snape could not have said. He stopped listening when she said “negligees.” In spite of himself, his brain leapt upon the suggestion of a slinky peignoir for Hermione to wear and would not let go.

“Where does one acquire such items?” he wondered



out loud, darting a glance at the house-elf.

“There are shops that specialise in only those things,” Nanny assured him. “Bewitching Wears is a popular wizarding lingerie store.”

Now he stood in the Leaky Cauldron, torn between which course to pursue. Ought he to stay with the familiar wizarding shops, where he would be more likely to be recognised by fellow shoppers or by shop clerks who had once been his students? Or should he venture into Muggle London, where he would not be recognised, but where he was much less comfortable?

He noted that a fair few of the customers in the Leaky Cauldron were wearing Muggle attire. With the ban on Apparition in place, Londoners were forced to use alternate methods of transportation. There were some wizarding taxicabs and limousines, but not nearly enough to keep up with the demand when the Ministry of Magic decided to put the whole wizarding world on high alert and to place an Anti-Disapparition Jinx over the entire city. As had become necessary near the end of the war, when the same injunction on Apparition was in place, wizarding folk were forced to use Muggle transport. Most of the wizards and witches who used Muggle trains, buses and taxis made an effort to blend in by wearing Muggle attire.

With grim decision, he Transfigured his clothing; his



trousers and coat became a Muggle suit, complete with a black necktie, and his robes became a lightweight Muggle mackintosh. Pulling his wallet from his trouser pocket, he determined that he did indeed have Muggle currency.

Now all he had to do was find the Muggle speciality lingerie shop in the next street.



Hermione immersed herself in Snape's wards, feeling the magic shimmering around her, holding her securely away from the cupboard. With a mental shift similar to a physical shimmy, she slipped through the top layer of the ward like a ghost through a wall. Methodically, she worked to reverse the next, middle layer, calling upon all of her skill. Hitting the wall of the last set of wards, she physically gritted her teeth as she strove to penetrate them. At the last moment, just as she felt as if she would fail and be turned away, she projected a reflection of the Shield Charm she had cast with Snape's wand. The ward, recognising the authority of the magic, fell with a sensation like silk sliding down her body.

With a pleased laugh of triumph, Hermione tucked away her wand and approached the now unprotected cupboard. She reached her hands to open the double doors and stood looking avidly at the shelves of Dark Arts books, which Professor



Snape had judged to be too dangerous to leave unguarded.

A wave of magical force emanated from the cupboard and promptly knocked her onto her bum.

Narrowing her eyes and gripping her lips in determination, Hermione quickly forgot her original purpose and decided she *would* read those books, whether *they* liked it or not!



The shop clerk watched the tall, elegant man as he entered the premises. The man stopped just inside the door and glanced around, his eyes widening just slightly at the sight of the many types of lingerie offered for sale. His movements as he advanced into the shop were hesitant. Taking pity on him, Sally approached him and spoke in her friendliest, most helpful manner. "Good day, sir; may I help you find something?"

The man frowned, a pronounced furrow appearing between his brows.

"A negligee," he finally admitted.

"A classic ensemble or something sexy?" Sally inquired.

One eyebrow went up. "Both?" the customer suggested.

Sally dimpled at him. "Let's see what we can find," she suggested. The hawk-nosed man did not smile back at her, but he did willingly follow her towards the racks of flimsy fabric. "Do you have a style or a colour preference?"



Snape's senses were assaulted from every direction by items which Hermione no doubt needed in every available colour. He began to wonder whether she ever needed to wear street clothes again.

"Sir?"

Forcing his attention back to the task at hand, he promised his inner hedonist that he would return here when he had more time to spend—perhaps even when he had a blushing bride to bring and to embarrass with his generosity.

Walking past the unimaginative black, white, and beige offerings, his black eyes skimmed the myriad of colours of satiny nightwear. All at once, his attention was riveted.

"This one," he announced decisively, removing one from the rack and watching the damn thing promptly slide off its hanger onto the floor.

"Oops!" Sally said cheerfully, bending to retrieve the short satin slip from the carpeted floor. "That happens all the time," she assured him, deftly replacing the gown on the hanger. "I love this hot coral colour," she said admiringly.

"The colour of flame," he murmured, his mind's eye already dressing Hermione in the lace-trimmed gown.

Sally smiled, recognising the signs of a man early in his relationship. "What size, sir?"

Snape gave the girl a disconcerted blink. "There are different sizes?" He was used to purchasing items that

were magically charmed to fit the wearer.

"Yes, there are," Sally assured him. "Do you know your lady's size?"

Snape snorted. "Of course I do," he stated imperiously.

"Oh!" Sally said, somewhat relieved. She played this guessing game with clueless men on a daily basis. "Which size is it?"

Mentally holding Hermione to him as she slept, he looked about him. First on the menu was the plump, pretty Sally. "Smaller than you," he said, musing, "but larger than she is." His hand flicked dismissively at the mannequin, with its Fleur-like slenderness.

Sally nodded attentively, taking no offence that he had used her body for comparison to make an explanation; she had been through this many times before.

Snape noticed a woman flipping through items that looked like nothing so much as his own old grey sleep shirts; she caught him raking his eyes over her form and gave him an appraising stare in return. Her welcoming smile indicated that he had passed her inspection, but he had already turned back to Sally. "She's about the same as *that* lady in this area," he explained, indicating his own chest. Slipping now into a recollection of dancing with Hermione, his hand about her waist, he gave up ogling the customers and resorted to hand gestures. "She's about this wide in the —"

he indicated his own narrow hips, unable to make himself say the word to this obliging Muggle girl.

Sally smiled at him as if he were a student who had just completed a difficult assignment. "Excellent!" she said. "Your lady would wear a medium." She replaced the gown he had pulled from the rack and chose a smaller one. "We have matching robes for these — would you like to give her the complete set?"

After approving the matching robe, Snape was standing at the counter, handing the pound notes to the clerk, when he felt the assault on the cupboard wards. The initial sensation was like standing next to a Chinese gong when it was struck. He swayed slightly on his feet from the reverberating sensation, somewhat alarming Sally.

"Are you all right, sir?" she asked, concerned, as she handed him his change.

Before he could answer her, Snape felt the tremor as the attacker slid through the top layer of his defensive spells.

Seeing him follow the sway with a shiver, Sally spoke again. "Sir, are you ill?"

Snape waved a dismissive hand and the shop clerk slipped the flame-coloured ensemble into a bag. He was reaching to take it from her when he felt a fleeting sensation as if he had been disassembled from the inside out.

"Thank you!" he gasped to the girl, snatching the bag from her hand and jamming it carelessly into the large

pocket of his mack. He turned and strode purposefully out of the store, his long legs carrying him quickly back towards Charing Cross Road.

He was just around the corner from the Leaky Cauldron when the slipping sensation of the last ward slid down his tall form, caressing his body from his throat to his ankles as it fell. For the veriest instant, he felt Hermione's hand upon his flesh, just as he had done when she used his wand to cast the protective spell over him during the Estuary battle. It was her — she was breaking into the Dark Arts cupboard! Devil *take* the girl!

He broke into a run and swiftly covered the rest of the distance to the wizarding pub and its Floo connexion to Grimmauld Place, sending up a plea to every deity to preserve Hermione from harm.



Hermione stood and reached within the cupboard, choosing a book at random and pulling it from the shelf. The book was ancient, its binding of odd-looking leather covering parchment-like pages that appeared ready to crumble at the merest touch. There was something repulsive in the feel of the book; as she carefully opened to the first page, which was written in a language she did not recognise, it dawned upon her that the "leather" of the cover was human

skin. Uttering a small scream, she tossed the book from her, unmindful of where it fell upon the floor.

From within the cupboard, a growling sound now emanated, as if an animal were attempting to escape a much-hated kennel. It came to her that she would do well to close the cupboard door before whatever it was escaped into the room, but as she put her hands upon the cupboard doors, a shower of tiny, silvery arrows erupted from the dark reaches of the cupboard. Her first impression was that the arrows were pretty — she was moved to touch them, to pick one up and examine it — but every place upon her body that the arrows had touched was burning, as if scorched. The arrows disintegrated into nothing as they struck the floor.

Slapping at her arms and shoulders, ascertaining that she was not on fire, Hermione was unaware of the movement of the book upon the floor. Its cover flipped open and pages began to fly over, until the book was open to its exact centre, which was blotched with a dark, sticky-looking stain, reminiscent of recently dried blood. A dark cloud, as of tiny, swarming insects, began to rise from the open book. Indistinct at first, it soon began to take on form, vaguely shaped like a person.

Hermione became aware of it only as the teeming mass began to buzz. She whirled, unwisely turning her back to the cupboard, and gasped at the sight of the cloud.

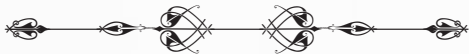
Another wave of malevolence washed over her from the cupboard, momentarily dispersing the insect-like emanation. Hermione stumbled forward, as if shoved from behind, and caught herself on the edge of the desk. As she did so, the professor's implements began to attack her. Quills that had been neatly lined up on the desktop flew at her like darts. Hermione instinctively threw her hands to her face, protecting her skin with her fingers rather than attempting to defend herself magically. Next, a heavy paperweight flew across the desk, smacking her in the arm with bruising force.

"Ow!" she yelled, moving her hands from her eyes to grab her arm, just in time to see the inkstand hurling at her head. She dropped to her knees to avoid the collision and heard the inkstand smash into the wall behind her. Refusing to continue to cower on the rug before the desk, Hermione angrily pulled her wand from its sheath, standing to face the cupboard again, casting a Shield Charm against the ferocious office apparatus.

As she turned, the buzzing sound grew so loud that she thought her head would split from the noise. Staggering slightly in her movement, she was horrified to see that the swarming black cloud had coalesced to form a daemon-like creature which seemed to grow as tall as the ceiling before a horrific face leered at her from within its shifting shape and a

sinister voice spoke to her from within the cloud.

“Pandora?”



Snape Flooded into the first floor sitting room fireplace, scrambling across the room and thundering through the corridors, trying not to allow himself to be distracted by the ominous sounds coming from behind the closed door of the library. He tried the door by hand before using a non-verbal “*Alohomora*” which caused it to fly open, slamming into the wall and rebounding again, only to be stopped by Snape’s body.

He paused in the doorway, his heart stopping in his chest at the sight before his eyes. Hermione had a Shield Charm shimmering about her person as she faced the hulking form of the being threatening her. As she stood, feet apart, braced for battle, various items from the desk-top and the shelves were hurling themselves indiscriminately at her, bouncing off the magical barrier she had erected. As he watched, the cloud figure reared over her menacingly and Snape surged forward, coming between Hermione and the buzzing swarm with a roar of rage.

Hermione was aware of him as soon as the door slammed into the wall and was heartily thankful he had been so prompt. The immediacy with which he came forward to champion her sent a thrill liltng down her spine even as



relief flooded her synapses and she staggered back a step.

Snape came between Hermione and her attacker with a burst of spontaneous defensive magic which blew the teeming cloud backwards in disarray. Without pausing, Snape trained his wand upon the open book on the floor and murmured to himself, a sing-song chant of words unfamiliar to Hermione’s ears. As he crooned the incantation, the black specks of matter were sucked back into the centre of the book in a swirling, protesting mass, until the air was clear of them and the book was slammed closed. Snape then snatched the book from the floor and thrust it back into the cupboard, slamming the doors with unnecessary force and casting a series of wards upon the cabinet that he would have defied a Gringotts curse-breaker to remove.

Hermione lurched into one of the chairs, mesmerised by his wand work. Giving Professor Snape fulsome compliments about his *foolish wand waving* had not been on Hermione’s agenda for the day, but she was unable to help herself. “You are truly a powerful wizard!” she exclaimed, watching the desk accoutrements resume their blameless positions upon the desktop.

Snape turned on her savagely. “I don’t need *you* to tell me so!” he spat. “*You* are truly an idiot! How dared you do this? If you had been killed you would have come by your just deserts!”

“Oh, codswallop,” Hermione responded, atoning for



her previous error by stoking the flames of his wrath.

The resulting conflagration was all that she could have hoped for. Snape's ensuing tirade gave vent to his every frustration of the last month. He ripped her character to shreds; condemned her behaviour, her ethics, and her upbringing; expressed his strong desire to have the schooling of her, and, in the same breath, pitied the man who would be fool enough to marry her; and fervently looked forward to the day when he should be forever relieved of her unwelcome presence in his life.

It was doubtful that Hermione could have calmed him even if she had wished to do so. As it was, she endured his diatribe with her eyes averted. She knew that his rage had been fanned to this incendiary pitch by finding her unhurt. She had never been more relieved to see the professor, and one look at his face had informed her that he had suffered a degree of anxiety beyond his concerns for the Dark Arts books. He could rant all he pleased, but *she* was not fooled.

Snape then turned on his heel and flung out of the room; moments later, the resounding slam of the front door informed her that he had left the house.

Trusting that he had gone to douse his temper in the Firewhisky at his club, Hermione set about her business.

First, she would need a taxicab.

Remus Lupin was sitting in the Lion, his London club, reading through a travel brochure, when he became aware of a tug upon his robes. Looking down, he was quite surprised to see Dobby, the house-elf, bowing before him.

"Dobby is begging your pardon, Professor Lupin, Sir, but Miss Hermione is sending you this note."

Lupin read through the note quickly and stood, placing the parchment in his pocket. "Please tell Miss Hermione that I shall be there directly, Dobby," he said, striding to the hearth and stepping up to Floo back to Phoenix House.

Hermione sat at the desk in her room in Grimmauld Place, finishing up the last of the letters she was writing. Her overnight bag was open on the floor beside her bed, her bunny slippers peeking out of the top. Beside the bag was Crookshanks' travelling basket. She heard the bell chime below; realising that it was likely Remus, she gathered up her things, snapping the clasp on the overnight bag closed and tucking an unresisting Crookshanks into his basket before carrying her things downstairs.

"Hello, Remus," she said with a smile, setting the carrier and bag down on the carpet in the sitting room. She

turned to Winky, who had just shown Remus up to the first floor, and handed her two sealed letters. "One of those is for Miss Tonks, Winky, and the other is for Professor Snape. Please be sure that they receive the notes as soon as they arrive."

Winky took charge of the notes with a curtsy and left the room.

"Hermione, why must you go to Islington?" Lupin inquired.

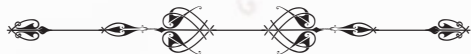
"My parents' home is there, Remus. Will you escort me? I really don't want to go alone."

Lupin noticed that Hermione was quite subdued, unlike her usual ebullient self; he perceived that she was troubled, and he wanted nothing so much as to be of service to her.

"Of course I will. Shall we Floo?"

Hermione shook her head. "My parents aren't on the Floo Network. I have requested a cab to meet us at the corner. Shall we go?"

Lupin readily picked up her bag and Crookshanks' carrier and followed her down the stairs and out of the house.



Sophronia sat up on the side of the bed, stretching like a cat. Her new husband reached out a hand and toppled her back against his chest; her youthful laugh tugged powerfully at his heart.



Following their very basic ceremony at the Ministry of Magic, Sirius had clasped her hand and stepped up with her into the fireplace, saying, "The Black house, Hampshire." They had stepped down into a nicely appointed parlour, all decorated in shades of blue and green.

"Where are we?" Sophronia had asked, looking about the room.

"Welcome home, Sophie," Sirius said, his clear grey eyes entreating her to like it. "We can't live at Snape's house — but I thought you would want to be near the Estuary, for the girls' sakes — so I bought this house for our family."

Sophronia hugged him, happy tears glittering on her lashes. "We have a house of our own?"

He smiled and swept her into his arms. "Let me show you the bedroom, Mrs. Black."

Several hours later, she had succeeded in viewing most of the house, though it seemed as if every road led back to their bedroom. Relaxing against her husband's chest, she was facing the open bedroom window when a barn owl flew in, bearing a letter.

"It's for you," Sirius reported, removing the letter from the owl's leg and passing it to Sophronia.

Sophronia broke the seal and spread the parchment, quickly reading through the contents.

"Hermione is in trouble and she needs for us to come



to her at her parents' home, in Islington," Sophronia said, putting the letter down and swinging her legs out of the bed. "But how are we going to get there?"

Sirius stood, stepping into a pair of rumpled denims which lay discarded on the bedroom floor.

"We'll get there," he promised.



Remus kept a watchful eye upon Hermione as the taxi cab wove its way through the city traffic. He did not want to question her while she was distressed, but he was quite curious about her plans. After a period of time, it seemed to him that her sombre mood lightened; soon the imps of mischief were dancing again in her eyes.

"Hermione, are we eloping together?"

He surprised a gurgle of laughter from her. "It's not as bad as that, Remus." He raised his eyebrows at her and waited for her explanation. "I'm just *kidnapping* you."

Now he laughed. "Why?"

She lowered her voice, as if she were imparting a great secret. "So that it will look as if we have run away to be married, of course."

"Good God, Hermione!"

Another trill of laughter escaped her. "Oh, it won't happen, Remus. And I've sent a note to have Sophronia meet us at my



parents' house, just in case we have to spend the night."

"For what purpose?" he demanded.

"Don't you see? I have left a note behind for Tonks, letting her know that since *she* has no use for you, I will induce you to marry me. If I know Tonks, she'll move heaven and earth to get to Islington to make sure that doesn't happen."

Lupin buried his face in his hands. "I have a good mind to tell the driver to let me out now," he threatened. "I feel like a fool."

"Tonks won't think of that, Remus. She'll just be determined to save you from me — and if you can't help yourself in those circumstances..."

He looked up at that, a faint gleam of hope in his eyes, and she smiled. "You'll see," she said softly.

"But, Hermione, I heard you tell the house-elf to deliver notes to Tonks *and* to Snape — you had better tell me the rest of it."

Hermione looked prim. "I have quarrelled so terribly with Professor Snape that I can no longer live under the same roof with him; so, I have gone to my parents' home."

"Is *that* what your note said?"

She nodded.

"He's going to kill me," Lupin murmured.

"Remember, Remus, he's still recovering from the battle — his wand arm is not strong enough for duelling!"



“Good God, Hermione, do you think Severus is going to think of that when he rushes to your parents’ home to save you from a ‘fate worse than death?’”

“Well, really, Remus — with any luck at all, you and Tonks will already be gone before he arrives.”

He glared at her. “Why am I not relieved?”

Hermione squeezed his arm. “Trust me just one more time, Remus.”

Though Lupin made no reply, he also did not bid the taxi driver to stop the vehicle; they continued on to Islington, Lupin looking like a man heading for his own disembowelment.



Tonks Flooed into the first floor sitting room at Grimmauld Place, thankful to have her workday behind her. She planned to bathe and dress very carefully before going to look for Remus. As she stood on the hearth, dusting the ash from her clothing, Winky approached her with Hermione’s note in hand.

“For me?” Tonks said, taking the note and seating herself on the sofa to read it.

Moments later, Fleur Delacour Flooed into the sitting room, stepping distastefully from the hearth and brushing ash from her robes. “I will be so glad when the Apparition ban is lifted!” she said, with a sniff. “I hate to



travel by Floo! Such a thing would never be permitted in Paris!” She stopped talking when she saw the expression on Tonks’ face. “What is it, Tonks?”

Tonks was not attending to her, but had thrown Floo powder into the fireplace, calling out, “Wizards’ Taxi Service!”

A clerk from the taxi service answered the call as Fleur picked up the discarded note and began to read it, excitement mounting in her with every word. Granger had run off with Lupin? Excellent! She would be ruined if word got out about this little exploit — and Fleur was just the woman to make sure that the story would reach the press...

“Nine o’clock!” Tonks screeched. “I don’t need a taxi at nine o’clock! I need one right now!” Her voice lowered forebodingly as she twitched the collar of her Auror’s robes. “Do you know who I work for?”

“Yes, Auror, and we’re sorry, but we will not have a car available until then.”

From below stairs, the doorbell chimed; Tonks strode out of the room, muttering angrily. Fleur hurried to the writing desk in the corner of the room and grabbed up a quill, dashing off a note to Severus. She would make sure he found out about the behaviour of his paramour!

Fleur exited the sitting room, standing on the landing to glance up and down, looking for Tonks.

“Fleur!” Percy Weasley came up the stairs, a smile upon



his face. "I did not expect the pleasure of seeing you here," he said to her.

"Why are you here, Percy?" Fleur asked, somewhat distracted.

"I was to escort Hermione to the new art exhibit at the National Wizarding Museum this afternoon," he explained.

Fleur's mouth twisted. "That will not be possible, I am afraid."

"The house-elf was just telling me that Hermione isn't here," Percy admitted.

Tonks came bounding down the steps, having changed out of her Auror robes into jeans and a tee-shirt. Pausing on the landing beside Fleur and Percy, she demanded, "Whose cab is that outside?"

Percy nodded to her gravely. "Good afternoon, Nymphadora. The taxi is mine; I am here to escort Hermione to the museum."

Tonks snorted. "Hermione isn't available for the museum, Percy, so you may as well give the taxi to me; I need it urgently."

Without waiting for an answer, Tonks pelted down the stairs, with Percy in hot pursuit. "See here, Nymphadora — you can't just take my taxi!"

Fleur followed the two of them down at a more sedate pace, pausing to speak to Winky before she walked out of

the house. "Please see to it that Professor Snape receives this note as soon as he arrives," she instructed.

Out on the pavement, the taxi driver, an obvious wizard, was standing in the street, his arms folded on the roof of the vehicle, watching Tonks and Percy argue about the ownership of the cab. Fleur joined them at last, stepping between the combatants and speaking to Percy. "Do you want to go to Miss Granger?"

Percy stopped in mid-argument and looked at her. "Well, yes," he said. "Tonks says she has eloped with Remus Lupin — I will call him to book!"

"Then get in and we will take you to her," Fleur said calmly.

Tonks elbowed Percy out of the way, staring at Fleur. "What do you mean, *we*? I don't want either of you!"

Fleur displayed the crumpled note from Hermione, which Tonks grabbed from her. "You stupid French cow! Why can't you mind your own business?"

Fleur smirked. "Anything that concerns Severus is my business. If you want the use of this taxi, I advise you to get in. It's beginning to rain."

Tonks slammed into the front seat next to the driver, leaving Percy to tenderly seat Fleur in the back before joining her there.

Hermione went around the Grangers' house, turning on lights. Remus strolled from room to room, examining the always-exotic belongings of Muggle households. Crookshanks, freed from his carrier, determined that his litter box was in its customary place, then began to investigate the house minutely, searching for raiders who might have invaded in the absence of the cat-of-the-house.

Hermione was in the kitchen, morosely considering the contents of the fridge, when there was the sound of a motor on the street.

"I don't believe it!" Remus exclaimed, throwing the front door open. Hermione rushed to join him, quickly spotting the cause of his amazement.

Roaring up the street, for all the world as if they were sixteen years old again, came Sirius and Sophronia, helmeted and be-goggled, seated on the back of a 1970's-era Kawasaki motorbike.

Pulling into the drive with a flourish, Sirius put down the kickstand and helped Sophronia to alight.

"Padfoot, are you insane?" Lupin demanded, striding out of the house to admire the beautifully restored motorcycle.

Sirius pulled Sophronia to him with a possessive arm, gesturing to his best friend. "The man who spends one night a month literally howling at the moon has the nerve to ask me if *I'm* insane?"

Sophronia spotted Hermione in the doorway and moved away from the men, her hands outstretched to the younger woman. "We came as quickly as we could, my dear. What happened? Why have you left Grimmauld Place?"

Hermione led Sophronia into the house as large raindrops began to splat on the drive.



Snape entered the foyer at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and was promptly pounced upon by Winky. Taking the two notes that were thrust into his hands, Snape tore first into the one in Hermione's writing, then read his fiancée's note, his expression becoming more grim with each word.

"Where is Professor McGonagall?" he demanded of the cringing Winky, then climbed swiftly to the first floor sitting room to find her. "Minerva, what the devil do you mean by..."

He stopped in mid-sentence, staring at Minerva's companion. "Ah, Severus, my boy!" Professor Dumbledore said, rising to cross to him. "It is good to see you looking so well!"

"Headmaster!" Snape said, with awful irony. "What an excellent time for you to return!"

"Come in and have a cup of tea, Severus," McGonagall said, ignoring his sarcastic attitude. "Or a glass of wine, if you prefer."

Having clapped the younger wizard upon the shoulder, Dumbledore resumed his position on the sofa next to

Professor McGonagall.

"I do not want *wine*," Snape snarled. "Do you *know* where Hermione is, Minerva?"

McGonagall frowned. "Winky tells me that Hermione has gone to spend the night at her parents' home, to prepare for their homecoming. Did you need her for something, Severus?"

"She has eloped with Lupin, Minerva! Did Winky fail to mention that Lupin went with her?"

Dumbledore leant forward to pour a bit more wine into his glass. "Now, why would Hermione do that? There's no need for her to run off with Remus — they can be married in the normal way, can't they?" He watched Snape attentively.

"She has done it to infuriate me!" Snape spat. "And as for her marrying Lupin, she will do no such thing!"

"Oh, won't she?" Dumbledore said, deliberately poking the bear. "Who says so?"

"I say so!" Snape snapped. "Are you going to sit there drinking wine, or are you going to come with me to Islington to fetch Hermione?"

McGonagall and Dumbledore each gave him looks of mingled amusement and — was that *pity*?

"What are you going to do when you get to the Grangers' house, Severus?" Dumbledore inquired gently.

"Strangle her!" Snape said, turning and storming out of the room.

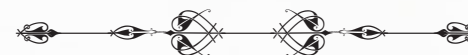
"Well, he doesn't need our help for *that*," Dumbledore murmured, sharing a smile with McGonagall.



Snape precipitated himself from the house, striding angrily to the corner where he had arranged to meet the wizarding limousine driver. The owner of the limousine company had not intended to go out into the rain on this night, but the outrageous bribe Snape offered had convinced Mr. Swift of the Swift Limousine Service to venture out in spite of his misgivings.

Snape had struggled with himself all afternoon, tempted to return to Grimmauld Place and to tell the impossible girl that he had not meant a word of the things he said to her; only the knowledge that such a show of openness on his part could easily lead to the loss of control in other areas kept him in his chair in the Cave. He was not free to say — or to do — the things he wished. He had to stay away.

Climbing into the door courteously held for him by Mr. Swift, Snape spoke aloud the address of the Grangers' home and settled back for the trip to Islington.



Sophronia gently pushed Hermione from the kitchen. "I will look over the larder and see what I can whip up for

supper, Hermione. It's been a long time since I've had the chance to cook a meal."

Hermione looked penitent. "If I had any inkling that your 'errand in the city' this morning was to get married I never would have sent for you," she said miserably.

Sophronia gave her a hug. "Well, if no one shows up, you certainly do not need to be stuck alone here with Remus; it is unseemly. Sirius and I don't mind helping, my dear, not after all you have done for Stormy. You go out to Remus, and send Sirius to me — he can help with supper."

Hermione sent a very willing Sirius to assist his bride in the kitchen and she sat down before the hearth with Remus. The rainy night had turned cool, and Remus and Sirius had coaxed quite a respectable fire to burn in the sitting room.

"Why so glum, Remus?" she asked, watching the firelight playing upon his prematurely aged face.

"It's late, Hermione. Tonks isn't coming. She doesn't care."

Hermione was reaching an encouraging hand to Remus' arm when Sirius stuck his head back into the sitting room. "Hermione, are you aware that you have a nest of Pygmy Puffs under the dresser in the kitchen?"

"What?" Hermione jumped up. "We don't have Pygmy Puffs, Sirius, this is a Muggle home!"

"Well, you might want to come and explain that to the Pygmy Puffs, because you have to move them out of the

kitchen — Sophie can't cook with them scampering all over the floor."

Hermione was gone only a few moments, before returning with a box in her arms. "Fletcher is a girl," she announced.

Lupin looked up, and seeing her burdened with a wooden box, stood to take it from her.

"Isn't Fletcher Stormy's pet Pygmy Puff?" Lupin inquired, peering into the box at the mass of humming balls of pink and purple fluff.

"Yes, he's the large pink one, with the indelible ink stains on his fur. Only, he must be a she. Look at all these Pufflings!"

Crookshanks began to mew insistently and Hermione abandoned Lupin with the box to go to her familiar. He was in the hallway beside her overnight bag, his head and front paws buried in its depths.

"Crooks, get out of there!" She pulled him out, only to find him with a tiny Pygmy Puff dangling from his mouth. Carefully pulling the Puffling from Crookshanks' teeth, she inspected the inside of her bag. "Well, that explains how Fletcher got here," she said, scooping a second Puffling out of her bunny slipper. "He stowed away with my slippers."

"That Pygmy Puff moves around more than any of his kind I've ever seen," Lupin muttered, placing the box

upon the floor near the fire.

Hermione paused in the doorway, raising a finger to silence Lupin. After a moment, they could both hear an idling motor.

“Tonks!” Hermione exclaimed. “Wait here, Remus — and good luck!”

Hermione snatched the door open before the bell could be rung, and Tonks fairly fell into her arms.

“Hermione! How could you? You know how I feel about Remus!” Tonks gripped her arms and gave her a tiny shake. “I could just hex your nose off!”

“Tonks! Be careful! Watch out for the Pufflings!” Hermione shifted both Pufflings into one hand, giving Tonks a gentle nudge and saying, “Go on in, Tonks.”

The Auror entered the sitting room and halted, her large dark eyes drinking in the sight of Remus Lupin, poised before the hearth and watching her intently.

“Oh, Remus!” Tonks cried, standing with her fists clenched, the very picture of a woman used to fighting her own battles. “What’s the matter with you? How could you run away with Hermione? Don’t you know I love you?”

Looking at her steadily, Remus answered, “How could I possibly know that, Tonks?”

“Because I *do*!” Tonks told him, her voice thick with unshed tears. “I always have —”

“Does Krum know that?” Lupin interrupted roughly, jealousy wringing the words from him. “Because I will never, *ever* share you, Tonks. I love you far too much, for that.”

“Oh, Remus,” Tonks said, launching herself at him, “I’ve been so stupid! Please say you’ll forgive me!”

With great presence of mind, Lupin caught the darling girl to his heart with a terrific grip, his lips descending to capture hers after he growled, “Only if you promise to be my wife.”

Hermione watched this touching scene with an air of great satisfaction, an affectionate smile curving her lips. Creeping past the lovers, who were wrapped in a fierce embrace, she deposited the Pufflings in their box and moved to the kitchen door. Entering, only to find Sirius and Sophronia in a similar clench, Hermione ducked down the hallway, leaving each pair to their own happy devices. Quietly retrieving her overnight bag from the hallway, she was on the way upstairs to put her things away when the doorbell chimed.

Insensibly, her heart leapt into her throat. Was he here?

Swallowing, she squared her shoulders and went to answer the front door.

“Miss Delacour! Percy!” Hermione gaped at the unexpected people on her doorstep.

“Would you let us in, please?” Fleur demanded icily. “It’s raining out here.”

"Why did you come?" Hermione countered, stepping back to let them in.

Still wrapped in Lupin's arms, Tonks glanced back over her shoulder at Hermione. "Please don't be angry with me, Hermione. I tried to keep them away, but they insisted upon coming with me."

"But where have you been?" Hermione asked Fleur. "Tonks got here ten minutes ago!"

There was a loud sneeze and all attention turned to Percy; Hermione now noted that he was drenched to the skin. His red hair, dark with rain, was plastered to his skull, and his clothes were wringing wet and dripping upon the tile of the entranceway. His eyes were not visible behind the fogged lenses of his horn-rimmed glasses.

"I don't know what to do!" he said querulously, sounding as miserable as he looked. "I was going to teach Lupin a lesson, but I think I've caught a cold." In proof of this statement, Percy sneezed again.

Lupin glared at Percy from his place by the fire, cradling his heart's desire in his arms. "If you think you're going to teach *me* a lesson, you wet whelp, you had best think again. And don't step on the Pufflings!"

Hermione darted down and scooped up an escaped Puffling.

Ignoring this interchange, Fleur broke in angrily.

"We're late because I had to take the taxi back to pick up Percy! Tonks quarrelled with him on the way here and she forced him out of the taxi at wand-point!"

"He's *such* a prat," Tonks complained to Lupin, sotto voce.

Lupin bit his lip and nodded, rubbing comforting circles on Tonks' back and trying not to laugh.

Fleur turned on Hermione. "Your behaviour today has caused inconvenience to everyone who knows you! At the very least, you could show some common decency to Percy! He must get out of these wet clothes!"

Turning back to the soaked Weasley, Fleur helped him off with his coat, draping it on the coat tree in the hallway and leading him to a seat by the fire. Hermione, watching them with a calculating look, had a brainstorm.

"Remus!" she whispered from the hallway.

Lupin walked to her, bringing Tonks with him, as if he were reluctant to release her.

"The taxi is still out front," Hermione told him, nodding her head toward the street. "Go now; I'll help Fleur get Percy settled."

Lupin placed his free hand upon Hermione's back. "Come with us," he urged her. "You don't want to be stuck here with *them*."

Hermione shook her head. "No, I'm not ready to go back, yet." She twinkled at him. "I'm going to encourage Fleur to

nurse Percy, and very likely they will make a match of it!"

Tonks gaped at her. "What are you talking about? Fleur is engaged to Severus," she hissed.

Lupin leaned to kiss Hermione on the cheek. "You are a dangerous woman," he told her, opening the door and urging Tonks out onto the porch. "I am forever in your debt. I hope you get what you want, Hermione — and that you won't regret it, once you've got it."

Hermione stood for a moment in the doorway, watching Lupin bundle Tonks into the back of the taxi, then she briskly entered the sitting room.

"I wish you had stayed in London, Percy," she said in an uncaring voice. "Now you'll no doubt expect us to squeeze fresh orange juice for you and heat water for a hot foot bath!"

Percy looked up eagerly, his lips blue from the cold of his wet clothing. "A hot foot bath would be just the thing!"

Hermione snorted. "I was only joking, Percy. You can't be serious!"

Fleur bristled. "It would be too much to ask to expect for *you* to show the smallest concern for someone else's discomfort," the Frenchwoman said scathingly, conveniently forgetting who had nursed Stormy. "If you had a speck of decency you would find a change of clothes for him!"

In short order, Hermione had ensconced Percy in her

parents' spare bedroom, provided him with a pair of her father's pyjamas and a warm dressing gown, and taken clean towels into the attached bathroom in case Percy should want a warm bath.

"He should have something warm to drink — and some hot soup!" Fleur said, glaring at Hermione.

Hermione shrugged indifferently. "The kitchen is at the end of the hallway at the foot of the stairs," she said, walking out of the room and managing to go inside her bedroom along the corridor before giving in to her giggles.

Her moment of hilarity passed, Hermione paused for the first time in hours and took stock of her situation. She glanced about her childhood bedroom, seeing the books which had been her solace in a time when she had felt so excluded from her primary school classmates and which had continued as her solace in her life at Hogwarts. It was true that she had made friends there, but her intelligence and her ambition had always isolated her from her peers.

Moving past the bookcase, she knelt beside her toy shelf, where she reached a gentle hand to her dolls. She had not been such an unusual child, really. She had played mummy with her baby dolls, and dreamed of her own home, with a husband and children. She had not realised until this moment, after an evening spent in company with Sirius and Sophronia and Remus and Tonks, just how

desperately she still clung to that dream.

Standing, she crossed to the windows, looking out on the rain-drenched street below, mistily illuminated by streetlights. This was it, for her. Tonight was her window of opportunity. She had risked everything on this throw of the dice, instigating the row with Snape in the hopes that this plan could be set into motion. If he did not come, she would have to accept, once and for all, that he was meant to be with Fleur. It would be the Office of Last Resort for her; she could not begin to imagine the man to whom she would choose to give herself if she could not have the one she desired with all her being.

Turning from the window, she looked about to find something with which to occupy herself while she waited. Knowing that she would not be able to concentrate well enough to read, she picked up her Rubik's Cube from the top of her toy shelf and descended the staircase, seating herself in a chair turned to face the front door.

She heard Fleur go to the kitchen, exchanging somewhat sharp words with Sirius, and then go back upstairs. She heard the murmuring voices of Sirius and Sophronia coming from the kitchen; occasionally, she scooped up a Puffling and returned it to its box.

When he came, he did so in his own inimitable way.

Hermione was concentrating as best she could on the

Rubik's Cube, her lower lip caught between her teeth, twisting a row of red blocks two turns to the right. The front door opened and a man-sized shape stood silhouetted in the doorway for a moment before he stepped into the hallway and closed the door with a decisive snap.

"Good evening, Hermione," Snape said conversationally, shrugging out of his mack, his expression sardonic. "Had you given up on me?" He placed the coat over the back of a chair, continuing, "I beg your pardon. You may have noticed that it's raining and traffic through the city was rather heavy."

Hermione looked up from the Rubik's Cube. "Good evening, Professor. Have you come to prevent me from marrying Remus?"

Snape's attention was distracted. "Is that *mine*?" he demanded, indicating the cube-shaped puzzle.

Hermione gave him a sideways glance. "That depends — what are you referring to?"

Snape had advanced into the room, ready to snatch his property from her hand, but he stopped at her words, his glittering eyes looking down into her face.

Hermione returned his gaze, wondering what he would do next.

"What in blazes?" Snape looked away from her, his eyes riveted on a lavender ball of fluff crawling over the toe of his boot.

"Oh, be careful!" Hermione said, bending to retrieve the Puf-

fling. "Fletcher is a mother," she told him inconsequentially.

"You don't mean to say that there are *more* of these infernal creatures?" Without thinking, he accepted the Puffling Hermione placed in his hand, and allowed himself to be led by the arm over to see the wooden box by the fire. "Damnation — Stormy will want to keep *all* of them," he muttered.

"Well, I can hardly see what your objection will be to that, Snape; they will be in *my* house, not *yours*, you know."

Sirius Black lounged against the wall by the doorway into the kitchen. Snape glared at him, unconsciously stroking with one long finger the humming purple Puffling held in the palm of his hand. "What are you on about, Black?"

Sophronia appeared then in the kitchen doorway, an apron tied over her casual Muggle attire and an attractive flush in her cheeks. "Sirius and I were married today, Severus," she said softly, walking past her husband to place a hand on her stepson's arm.

Snape quirked an eyebrow at her. "I knew you were up to something," he said softly.

Sophronia smiled, reaching out to take the Puffling from him and to return it to its box. "Yes, but what are *you* up to?" she countered.

Snape jerked his head around. "Where is Fleur?" he demanded.

Hermione chuckled again. "How did you know she was here?"

"She was so obliging as to leave me a note, informing me of her intention to come here," he answered through clenched teeth.

"Oh, *that* explains why you have come," Hermione said with exaggerated sadness, turning her back to him.

"It explains nothing of the sort, and you know it!" Snape snarled, turning her back to face him with an ungentle hand upon her shoulder.

"I think we are *de trop*," Sirius murmured, tugging his wife back into the kitchen with him.

"Well, she is assisting Percy," Hermione told Snape with an air of innocence.

"Percy? Weasley? What the hell is he doing here?"

"Fleur brought him from London, but Tonks put him out of the taxi, so he got drenched in the rain and caught a cold," Hermione explained helpfully, doing nothing to make the matter more clear to Snape.

Snape glared at her through narrowed eyes. "If I find that you've been making up all of this twaddle just to confuse me, you will be *very* sorry," he promised her, beginning to stride from the room. "Now, where is Fleur?"

"I believe you will find her with Percy in the spare bedroom," she replied.

"What?"

"She's probably just helping him change out of his wet things and into his pyjamas," she added. "The bedroom at the top of the stairs, Professor!"

Snape paused in the doorway, nailing her with a minatory scowl. "Do not move from this room, Hermione. I will deal with *you*, next."

Snape stalked out of the room with the grace of a panther on the hunt, and Hermione collapsed into the nearest chair, thankful that he had not seen how her knees were shaking. Sick with anxiety, she awaited what would be the outcome of the confrontation about to take place in the spare bedroom.

SNAPE CLIMBED the stairs with grim purpose and threw open the spare bedroom door, pausing in the doorway for effect, already knowing what his first words would be.

"What the devil is going on in here?"

Percy Weasley started violently, spilling hot tea upon himself from the mug in his hand, as well as upsetting the bowl of beef broth on the table by his chair.

"Good heavens, Severus!" Fleur cried indignantly.

"Must you come barging in as if you were born in a barn?" She pointed her wand at the mess on the floor, causing the broken bowl to repair itself and the spilt soup to Vanish; with her own hands, she picked up a cloth and wiped the tea from the flannel pyjama top worn by the red-haired wizard under her care.

Snape leant against the doorframe, his arms crossed over his chest, and regarded the tableau before him. Weasley was dressed in pyjamas that were at once too large and too short for him, covered by a threadbare old dressing gown of similar size. He was seated in a squishy armchair near the door to the connecting bathroom, from which the sound of running water could be heard, and from which wafts of steam were issuing into the bedroom. He had been supplied with a mug of hot tea as well as a bowl of hot soup, and a plethora of Muggle cold remedies were in a box upon the table by his chair. His red hair had been rubbed with a towel and was standing on end; his glasses were plagued with fog from the steamy bathroom, and his nose was an unattractive shade of pink.

Fleur, on the other hand, was a picture of domestic loveliness; her long, straight blond hair held at her nape by a clip and her neat jonquil robes like a splash of spring in the middle of the rainy evening. She hovered between Percy's chair and the open bathroom door, apparently

busy drawing water for his bath.

“The manner in which I conduct myself is a topic upon which I never expect to hear you comment at any time, or in any way — is that perfectly clear to you, madam?” Snape demanded icily. Without waiting for Fleur to answer him, he continued, “I had thought my friend was exaggerating when he told me he came upon the two of you in an alcove, holding hands and exchanging confidences at the Averys’ party at Blue Hill.”

“Lucius Malfoy was a liar!” Fleur spat.

Snape strode into the room and halted just short of Fleur. “Lucius Malfoy was the best friend I ever had. You will do well to remember that and to keep a civil tongue in your head about him.” The threat in his manner was implicit.

In spite of herself, Fleur took one step backwards. “Nothing happened at the Averys’ party,” she protested more quietly.

Snape sneered. “Oh, I see; that was just the beginning. You actually waited until Mr. Weasley began making daily visits to you in your home to begin an affaire behind my back, hmm?”

Percy glared and spoke, his nasal congestion making him sound rather silly. “Snape, you are raving. You will answer to me for these aspersions upon Miss Delacour’s character!”

Snape barely spared Percy a glance. “Don’t be a fool, Weasley. A man may say whatever he wishes about his own wife.”

The voice in which Fleur spoke was brittle as she battled

to hold on to her temper. “Percy, the tub is full now; go in and have your bath while I speak privately with Severus.”

Percy stood and stepped between them. “I do not wish to leave you alone with this madman,” he told her.

Snape snorted. “You had best get used to leaving her alone with me, Weasley. She will be mine very shortly and will see no one *but* me unless I give her explicit permission otherwise.”

Percy’s face went an alarming shade of maroon at Snape’s words. “What kind of animal are you, Snape?” he demanded. “That’s no way to treat a woman!”

“Percy!”

Fleur’s voice overrode Percy’s outburst and he turned back to her.

“The bathroom. Please.” She spoke more quietly to him, almost reassuringly. “You need have no alarms; Severus will not harm me.”

Muttering darkly to himself, Percy went into the steamy bathroom, where his glasses promptly fogged over completely; oblivious to the ridiculous picture he made, Percy spoke from the doorway. “Remember, I am just a room away, Fleur. Call me if he frightens you.”

The bathroom door snapped closed and Snape barked a short laugh. “You have him trained rather well for a Weasley, my dear; they are not usually so docile.” He sneered

at her. "But then, you have your *ways*."

Fleur crossed her arms over her breasts and regarded him steadily. "What would *you* know about my ways, Severus? You have never shown the least interest in them. I had begun to think you prefer men."

"No, madam — I prefer *women*." He paused for a moment, to let the insult sink in. "Warm, loving, compassionate mothers, wives, and sisters, who nurture their families and devote their efforts selflessly to the care of their loved ones. But I suppose *you* will have to do."

Fleur's colour began to rise. "I presume you prefer Hermione Granger!"

"Well, of the two of you, which one fits the definition?" he inquired silkily. "You could not be bothered to so much as visit my stepmother and comfort her when Stormy was ill, much less to nurse the patient."

Fleur uncrossed her arms, her hands clenched into fists. "You lied to me!" she countered. "You let me believe that Stormy had some dreadful infectious disease just to keep me away!"

"It didn't keep Miss Granger away, did it?" he goaded.

"And then you let me believe she had died! Everyone else who knew you knew that Stormy was still alive, but I, your affianced wife, was kept in the dark!" she cried. "You made me look foolish!"

"Why would I tell *you* something so important? *You* are

the one who gave the Death Eaters the information on where to find Stormy to begin with."

Fleur was so offended that she was nearly speechless. "I? What did I do?"

"You told a Death Eater informer that Stormy would be at the zoo on that day and they went to get her."

"I did no such thing!"

"Oh, I will acquit you of deliberation, Fleur, but not of stupidity. I interviewed everyone who knew about the zoo trip; you are the only one who had knowledge of the outing who spent time with an entire party of Death Eater sympathizers and ran your idiotic mouth. Why did you not stay away from the party as the entire rest of my family did?"

"You are unjust!" Fleur's voice had risen to a near-scream. "I was not invited! They left me *out* and went to the theatre that night!"

"So you divulged information about the movements of my *baby sister* out of petty spite?" As Fleur grew louder, Snape grew quieter.

"No! I did not — I would not do such a thing!"

"No more than you would permit Weasley to fondle you in a public place and spend day after day in private visits with him behind closed doors?"

"How dare you?" she shouted. "I found the receipts, Severus! I know all about the *love nest* in Potter Place!"

I've seen the receipts for the furnishings! I know about the South Sea pearls!" Enraged, Fleur yanked the pearl bracelet from her own wrist with such violence that the silk broke and pearls hit the floor like the rat-a-tat of bullets, rolling in every direction. "That is what I think of your stupid gift to me! How dare you humiliate me and insult me in that fashion?"

Snape spoke with arctic accents. "You have been going through my private papers?"

Fleur froze for a moment, for the first time alarmed by this confrontation.

"I saw papers left out on your desktop where anyone could see them," she answered.

"And you found the receipt for my wedding gift to Skye and Bill Weasley, as well as the receipts for wedding gifts for the Malfoys, the Longbottoms, and other friends of my family who have recently married," he told her evenly.

"They were signed by Hermione Granger!" Fleur shouted. "That bushy-haired, jumped-up cow with the style of a street urchin and the upbringing of a Mudblood! I know you're sleeping with her, Severus — I know you bought that four-hundred Galleon bracelet for your tart! I saw her wearing it last night!"

"Hermione Granger was gracious enough to do some shopping for Sophronia as a favour to her — because that's

the kind of person Miss Granger is, Fleur — the kind who will go out of her way to do a favour for a friend!" He took a menacing step in her direction. "If I choose to buy and give a gift to any person for any reason it will never be any business of yours, nor will it be your place to comment upon my actions. Ever."

Fleur's reaction to these words was everything for which Snape could have wished.

After months of carefully monitored self-restraint, Fleur lost her temper. The tirade which had brought about the end of her relationship with Bill Weasley had been a cataclysmic event which had caused her to rethink her priorities, and she had successfully controlled herself for months. This, however, was simply more than she could bear.

Fortunately for Percy Weasley, who was soaking in the hot tub in the muggy bathroom, he was not a speaker of the French language. If he had been, the next few moments of uninterrupted ranting might have forever altered his opinion of Fleur Delacour as a delicately reared young woman of excellent breeding and admirable taste.

Snape, on the other hand, spoke French like a native, and had to admit to himself that the Veela had a remarkable command of French swearwords for a privately educated witch from a pure-blood family. He listened to her with a mocking sneer upon his lips, the unpleasant

expression belying the excitement rising within him as Fleur completely lost control of herself.

Ending her diatribe on a note which would loosely translate as, "...and the horse you rode in on!" Fleur proceeded to remove the emeralds from her ears, her throat, and the third finger of her left hand, thrusting them at Snape, who insolently shoved them into his trousers pocket.

"You will oblige me by sending a notice to the DAILY PROPHET announcing that our engagement is at an end!" she ground out angrily, remembering now to speak in English.

"It shall be done at once," Snape replied, bowing stiffly. "Please accept my profound regrets and earnest wishes for your future happiness, madam."

And with those fateful words, Severus Snape turned on his heel and walked out of the room, a free man once again.



Hermione sat upon the floor in the sitting room, her back to the hallway, idly stroking the Pufflings in the wooden box while Crookshanks looked on jealously. She heard Snape when he entered the room and was acutely aware of him standing over her, but she behaved as if she was ignorant of his presence. Now that she was at this place she had hoped to reach, she had no idea how to proceed.

Snape entered the sitting room and spied his prey, seated



upon the floor by the crate of Pygmy Puffs. He was torn between the desire to box her ears and to kiss her senseless; the two emotions seemed to merge into one impulse within him. He was brought up short, however, by a niggling detail. He had meticulously designed the confrontation just completed above stairs with Fleur, choosing what he would say to cause her to react in the way he wished. He had made *no* plans for what he would do with Hermione once he had rid himself of his troublesome fiancée.

Truth to tell, he had little experience with these matters. It was one thing to cold-bloodedly choose a partner for a marriage of convenience and then to find a way out of that contract; it was another entirely to court the woman who held one's heart in the palm of her rather small hand.

After a moment, he growled, "I believe you were expecting me?"

Without looking up at him, Hermione said, "I keep counting them, but I never get the same total twice — they keep moving around and escaping the box."

"Get up from there," he commanded, and she willingly stood.

"Would you see how dinner is progressing?" she asked him, keeping her eyes on her feet.

"I think that would be a singularly pointless exercise," he told her, amused. "It is their wedding night, you know. Perhaps it would be a kindness to leave them alone."



Hermione dared to dart a look at his face, noting his sardonic amusement, but there was something else in his eyes — a warmth which she found strangely unsettling. Feeling herself suddenly short of breath, she walked away from him, her heart hammering in her chest.

“If you wish to eat this evening, we will have to go elsewhere,” he said, noting the signs of her obvious distress with dark satisfaction.

“But what about the Pufflings?”

“Your cat is herding them rather efficiently — and as Black was so quick to point out, they are *his* problem now, not mine.”

“What about Fleur?”

“Miss Delacour is occupied with her patient, I’m afraid,” he answered, wilfully misunderstanding her. “She will not be accompanying us.”

Hermione swallowed with some difficulty. “Where will we eat? Shall I change clothes?” This time when she looked at his face, his eyes were half-lidded; he was watching her as a cat will watch a mouse it has trapped in a small space.

“No,” he drawled, “I will take you as you are.” *Let her make of that what she will*, he thought.

“All right,” Hermione said, “I’ll come with you.”

He was behind her in a flash, moving upon feet made silent through years of necessary stealth; she felt his

breath upon her cheek as he spoke, his lips so close to her ear that she could smell the oil of peppermint from the mints he had eaten. “Were you under the impression that you had another option?” he purred.

Hermione’s eyes closed and a tiny tremor went through her, induced by his proximity and the texture of his voice. What would he do now, so close that the tiniest shift would bring his lips into contact with her skin?

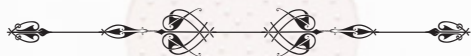
Snape stooped to whisper his taunt into her ear and was immediately assailed by her ever-present scent. As the strawberries and essence of almond flooded his senses he felt control of the situation shift beneath him like a living thing.

As quickly as he had come down upon her, he moved away, striding to retrieve his mackintosh from where it had slid from the chair onto the carpet. He shrugged into it, saying, “Did you bring a coat? Get your things.”

He informed the otherwise-occupied Black that he was taking Hermione home, then waited in the hallway as she slipped into her raincoat. He opened the door so that she might precede him onto the porch. Resisting the urge to grab her as she moved past him out the door, he glanced once more about the hallway. Standing in the doorway, his eyes fell upon the puzzle cube with which she had been occupied when he arrived; she had abandoned it on a tabletop in favour of counting Pufflings.

The puzzle was solved, each side of the cube one colour, just as his had been when he first removed it from its packaging. The infuriating girl had accomplished with apparent ease that which Snape had struggled with for untold hours: she had unravelled the dilemma of the puzzle as if she had been born to do so.

He chose not to muse upon what parallels might be found therein for his life.



“A limousine?” Hermione asked uncertainly, seeing Mr. Swift’s vehicle parked on the street.

“Well, Hermione, you invited so many people to this soirée — I was uncertain how many I would be obliged to provide with transportation back to Grimmauld Place,” Snape replied, as if daring her to challenge him.

Wisely keeping her head down, Hermione preceded him down the path.

“Dumbledore returned today,” he said to her as Mr. Swift opened the rear door of the limousine for Hermione to climb in.

Hermione paused and looked at him. “Did he?”

“Oh, yes,” Snape assured her, allowing himself to feel for the first time the freedom from his duties as chaperone. Hermione was now Dumbledore’s problem again, a fact



which brought him a feeling of immense satisfaction.

He indicated that she should seat herself and she did, scooting to the middle of the long seat. His face then appeared in the doorway. “What would you like to eat?”

Hermione answered without thinking. “I don’t think I could eat anything, right now.” With the adrenaline coursing through her it seemed as if she would never be hungry again.

One side of Snape’s mouth went up, and without looking behind him, he said, “Drive, Mr. Swift — just drive. I will notify you of our destination when we have determined what it shall be.” Then he, too, climbed into the back of the car, seating himself on the bench seat directly across from her, their knees nearly touching, and Mr. Swift shut the door, closing them into the intimate space of the limousine interior, alone together.

The vehicle began to move and Snape settled back into the very comfortable upholstery, allowing his gaze to settle on the window to his right, staring out into the ever-darkening night sky. Now, he would let her wait and wonder.

Hermione huddled on the seat across from Snape, a cacophony of emotion swirling in her mind. He had promised that he would “deal with” her, yet he had not scolded her. He had spoken quite naturally to her, seeming to fall back into his former, friendly manner with her, such as she had known from him during their short idyll at the Estu-



ary. And now he had deposited her in this automobile and he was looking out the window, ignoring her — he seemed to have no interest in her, and nothing to say. Desperately, she tried to think of something to talk about to break the ongoing silence, but nothing came to her. Discomfited, she twisted her hands in her lap and tried not to look at him.

After a period of time, Snape pressed a button on a console next to him, and soft light flooded the space from lights mounted in the doors. Still, he did not speak, but looked at her, his posture relaxed, his expression enigmatic. Hermione's eyes darted about the compartment, as if looking for an avenue of escape, and she shifted uncomfortably, causing her knees to bump into his. Jolted with embarrassment, lest he think she had done it on purpose, she murmured an incoherent apology which trailed off into silence as he continued to look at her, without response.

She had become somewhat reconciled to having his unblinking gaze trained upon her when he confounded her by rising and swiftly moving to sit beside her, abandoning the facing bench seat. Alarmed by his sudden move, Hermione scooted away, feeling her heart beginning to pound in that unaccountable way again in reaction to his nearness. Unfazed, he followed her, moving so close that he had to place his arm on the seat behind her head, all the time, never looking away from her face.

Panicked now, Hermione uttered the first words which came to her mind. "I — I'm sorry!"

Snape gave her a look of polite inquiry. "Sorry, Miss Granger? Sorry for what, pray tell?"

She spoke in a voice choked by an emotion she could not name, averting her eyes and staring all the while at her hands, which were clenched in her lap. "For the books! I'm sorry I broke into the cupboard and disturbed the Dark Arts books."

"What mendacity!" he said, amused. "You broke into that cupboard with premeditation and malice aforethought!"

Hermione forgot to stare at her hands and gaped at him. "Why would I do that?"

Snape's face moved infinitesimally closer to her. "For attention, Miss Granger."

Outrage now jostled for position in her features. "Whose attention?"

Snape looked like the cat that got the cream. "Mine, of course."

Hermione took a deep breath, ready to defend herself against such a base accusation, and even as her lungs filled with oxygen, she became acutely aware of his proximity, and she remembered how she had longed to be this close to him. What he said was no less than the truth, after all. And yet — and yet...

"You said we could see one another after I left school!" she cried, flinging this accusation into his smug face.

"You kissed Krum!" he countered. "In front of the entire student body and faculty! In broad daylight!"

Her mouth dropped open. "*He kissed me!* And I slugged him on the shoulder and told him for the hundredth time not to do that! Did you miss that part?"

Snape's avid eyes drank in her face, her dark eyes flashing in indignation, her chin lifted in her familiar combative attitude. She was magnificent. He told her, "What I said was that it would be *quite something to know you in private life* — and I was right; it has been *quite something*." The arm placed innocently along the back of the seat behind her head moved to her shoulders and he jerked her to him, his face descending. "It has been maddening, appalling, beguiling — and I want to know more," he breathed, his lips plunging to capture hers in a bruising kiss.

Hermione felt the pressure of his mouth upon her own, was overwhelmingly aware of his hair swinging down to curtain them both, and could not prevent her eyes from closing in sheer abandon as her greedy hands reached out to signify her approval of this course of action. One hand grasped the lapel of the Muggle mack he wore as the other hand slid under his hair to caress the back of his neck.

When he felt her fingers on the bare skin at his nape, he

gasped, his lips leaving hers to trail a path to her throat, where he groaned, "*Hermione*," before lifting his head to look down at her face. Seeing her closed eyes, her dark eyelashes feathered across her fair skin, he kissed her again.

Hermione thrilled at the sensation of his lips on her throat, felt as a physical sensation his uttering of her name in that broken groan, as if he was speaking a holy thing aloud. For a moment, he moved away from her, but she scarcely had an instant to grieve his absence before his lips came to hers again. Very soon, she was clutching at him as the only solid entity in an inexplicably swirling universe. The despicable man began to move his lips over hers, the pressure of the last kiss gone, now kissing the corner of her mouth, now nibbling her lower lip, teasing, coaxing, until she gasped. Taking the opportunity offered by her parted lips, his tongue slipped into her mouth and the sensations of the kiss multiplied ten-fold with the increased intimacy of this caress. She felt as if he was devouring her and she eagerly offered herself up for his delectation, timidly moving her tongue to touch his, unsure if he would welcome this active participation on her part. His reaction to this move was to moan directly into her mouth, as if he was unwilling to relinquish his possession of her lips for the space of time necessary to do the thing properly. Soon, though, he raised his face

from hers and her eyes opened.

Snape's heart was racing as if he had just run a sprint and his breathing was a bit uneven as he looked at Hermione's lips, swollen from his kisses; her head lay against his shoulder and she watched him with wondering eyes. The only sensible course of action seemed to be to kiss her again.

He dipped his head and she said, "But what about Miss Delacour?"

Her hands released their grip upon his mack and her eyes blinked, as if she was struggling to gather her wits.

"You heard her screeching — you know she ended it. Don't be coy."

His expression of indulgent amusement, overlaid with that blazing hunger in his eyes, brought a tremble to her voice. "I certainly heard her, but French is not my strong suit," she excused herself, almost wanting to look away from his glittering black eyes, but unable to do so.

The arm about her shoulders moved down to the small of her back, urging her hips closer to his own as the fingers of the other hand grasped her chin and his thumb stroked over her inflamed lower lip. "No, and neither is subtlety your strong suit," he said, as the thumb pressed gently at the crease between her lips and she yielded to him, opening her lips and lightly nipping at the pad of his thumb with her teeth. The thumb delved more deeply

into her mouth as his eyes held her own and she allowed it, bringing her tongue forward to sooth the bite she had given him. As her tongue caressed his flesh, Severus drew a ragged breath and drank in the sight of her licking his thumb with her tongue. "But we can work on both the subtlety *and* the French," he assured her, allowing her to see his own tongue as he bent to French kiss her again.

Hermione eagerly received him back into her mouth, revelling for a time in the way his tongue stroked her own, and in the way her body responded to his languorous, sensual kisses. At one point he ceased to kiss her so deeply, his tongue retreating further into his own mouth, darting back out to tease her before retreating again. In frustration, she thrust her tongue into his mouth in pursuit and was rewarded by him closing his lips upon her tongue and sucking at it as if it were a rare delicacy. Her physical response to this move of his was such a deep throb in her core that she moaned audibly into his mouth.

Severus lost no time, hastily seizing her and pulling her fully into his lap, burying one long-fingered hand in the hair at the nape of her neck for better control of the kiss and sliding the other beneath the hem of her tee-shirt, seeking and finding the smooth expanse of warm flesh on her back. He knew that the situation was getting away from him, but he could no more stop ravishing this ambro-

sial offering than he could willingly cease to breathe.

Until the squirming began.

“Damnation!”

Severus shifted Hermione back onto the seat at his side and dug into the pocket of his coat.

“What?” she said dazedly, wondering why she had been banished to this cold place out of his lap — she had thought things were going rather well, really.

By way of explanation, Severus pulled a humming ball of purple fluff from his pocket.

“How did you get in there?” he demanded of the Puffling, dangerously.

Hermione laughed softly. “Oh, it’s the one you were stroking before you went upstairs — I think it likes you.”

Severus held the creature on eye level and glared at it. “Don’t be ridiculous; these are not sentient beings — they are hairballs that hum.”

Hermione, however, was not paying him any mind. When he pulled the Puffling from the pocket of his mack, it came out dragging a plastic bag in its wake. Hermione recognized the visible portion of the store logo emblazoned on the bag — it was a well-known Muggle lingerie shop in London. Frowning, she slid the bag the rest of the way from his pocket and looked within — it was something slinky, but shapeless in the bag.

Severus realised, too late, what she had in her hand. “Give me that!” he said, reaching to snatch it from her.

Hermione landed a sound slap on his hand as, with her other hand, she dumped the flame-coloured cloth into her lap. “What is this?” She picked up the bit with cream coloured lace and held it up, identifying it as a nightgown.

“Nothing!” he said firmly, attempting to snatch it again, only to have her hold it in the hand farthest from him, as far from her body as she could reach.

“It is very nearly nothing!” she said, giving the satiny garment a shake. “You said you were finished with her!” she cried, incensed.

“I am! Give me that, Hermione!”

“If you wanted to be finished with her, why were you buying her negligees?” This question was punctuated by the throwing of the gown, which hit him squarely in the face. “Is that your idea of a good-bye gift?”

“No, dammit!” he said, seizing her wrists to prevent further flailing. “It’s for you!”

Hermione was furious with this obvious lie. “Why would I wear something like that?”

“For your husband!” he snapped, trying to keep her from hitting without holding her too tightly.

“I don’t have a husband! Who would I wear it for?” She was near tears, her emotional state fluctuating wildly.

"Me! Stop fighting!"

"You?" A rush of resentment coursed through her and she managed to free her hands from him, landing a good, flush hit to his jaw with one open palm. "You haven't even asked me!"

Severus glared at her, rubbing his jaw. "Forgive me for not caring to make up part of *that* parade."

"You *infuriate* me!" she cried, drawing her hand back again.

Severus held up his hand in a halting gesture. "I can see your point, of course," he conceded.

Hermione slumped back in her seat, absentmindedly rubbing the fabric of the robe, which still rested in her lap. It was hard to remain furious with someone who agrees with you, though she was getting rather tired after her long day, and did not find fighting with him to be as entertaining as being kissed by him. After a few moments, he spoke again.

"How did you envision that?"

"Envision what?" she said sullenly, refusing to look at him.

"Your proposal, Hermione," he responded patiently. "How did you imagine receiving your marriage proposal?"

She shrugged wearily. A girl doesn't want to be questioned about such things; she wants them to magically and perfectly occur. "I don't know — nothing special — just something like, 'Will you marry me?'"

She was startled when she was bodily picked up and placed back in his lap. "Yes, I will," he told her, seriously,

"but only if you promise to be a good girl and never, ever break into the Dark Arts books, again."

This time she smacked him on the shoulder. "I wasn't asking you!" she protested.

That smug smile on his face had been tempting people other than Hermione to slap him since he was ten years old and had learnt to do it. "Don't you want to marry me?" he asked her, snarling his hand once again in her hair. He pulled her down and pinned her head to his shoulder with the force of his kiss. With his free hand, he gathered her closer to him, caressing her hip and the outer length of her thigh through the denim of her jeans.

Hermione slipped the arm trapped between them down and about the small of his back, holding him closer even as he cradled her in his arms. Her other hand she raised to his face, caressing first his cheek, then his throat, and finally coming to rest on the back of his neck, holding his mouth to hers.

At last he ended the kiss, but raised his head only enough to murmur to her, his lips stroking hers as he spoke. "I believe I asked you a question," he said, the hand which had been stroking her hip now slipping up the back of her tee-shirt again and beginning to caress her bare skin with long strokes; her skin put the satin of the negligee to shame.

"Yes," she breathed into his mouth and pressed forward

just enough to engage his lips in another long and all-too-short kiss.

By the time they broke apart they were each breathing in short, ragged panting gasps, their hearts racing and their senses entirely disordered.

“Severus...” Hermione spoke in protest, shifting her bum provocatively across his lap and pressing herself to him, unsure of why he had stopped.

Severus had never seen a more desirable woman than the one sprawled across his lap in the backseat of this wizarding limousine; he could have her undressed and have both of them sated in quite short order — but he chose not to do so. He wanted this woman for his wife, which made her an object of reverence — everything would be done properly, as befitted her dignity. He was, after all, the more adult person here; it was up to him to do the thinking for both of them.

“When is your father home from Europe?” he asked her, bending to press his lips to her throat as he awaited her answer.

“What difference does that make?” she said, and he proceeded to show her.

The hand which had twined in her curls released her hair and slid up over her throat, stroking down, ever so lightly, over her breast. Hermione whimpered and arched involun-

tarily into his hand. With a groan, Severus attached his lips to her throat and caressed her in that way again, moving his mouth up from her throat to plunder her mouth again, his caressing hand becoming more exact and precise in its explorations with each pass.

When he was, at last, able to release her lips again, she clung to him, trembling, and gasped, “Tomorrow. He’ll be home tomorrow afternoon.”

He buried his face in her hair, immersing himself in her scent, and murmured in her ear, “Then perhaps you will use your influence to have me moved to the front of the queue, ahead of Lupin and Weasley? I wish to be the first to ask his leave to make you my wife,” he explained.

“It isn’t necessary, Severus,” she said, running her hand through the ebony strands of his hair. “My parents are Muggles; they don’t do things that way.”

Severus straightened up, cupping her chin in one long-fingered hand. “You, however, are a witch — you are *my* witch — and I will always make sure that every appropriate observation is given to preserve your honour. I will petition your family for the right to make my addresses to you.”

It was obviously pointless to debate with him. Hermione sighed and hid her face in the curve of his neck, one hand fingering the edge of his Muggle dress shirt collar. “Why are you dressed in a Muggle suit?” she asked him.

"I was doing a spot of shopping in Muggle London when I received your summons to join you at the Dark Arts cupboard; I haven't thought about it again, today."

"Shopping for this?" she asked, raising the gown from where it had fallen on the seat beside Snape.

"Will you please stop waving that around?" he growled, plucking it from her hand and moving it out of her reach.

"Why?" she asked idly, beginning to kiss his throat, just beneath his jaw.

"Because I can't see it without imagining you wearing it, minx," he answered, tightening his hold upon her.

Hermione stopped kissing him and pulled back a bit so that she could look him squarely in the face. "Women are not objects," she said.

He leant back from her and caressed the side of her face; she turned into his palm, pressing her lips to his fingers, clearly loving his touch. With his other hand, he brushed her hair back. "I cannot speak for women in general, Hermione, but I assure you that *you* are the *object* of my desire — would you have it otherwise?"

She endeavoured to assure him that she would not.



A lifetime later they were thoroughly dishevelled, clothing rumpled, hair mussed, lips bruised, aroused



beyond bearing — and Hermione was ready to kill him.

"But *why*?"

Severus pressed the console button beside him. "Mr. Swift? Would you please deliver us to number twelve, Grimmauld Place?"

Hermione regarded him from the facing bench. "We're going to be married as soon as we can, so why can't we —"

"No," he told her, basely revelling in the power he held over her. How many times had she driven him insane with her taunting wiles? Now *he* had the upper hand. If he could not carry his woman off to his bed to properly claim her, he could, at the very least, enjoy stirring her passions and leaving her in a bit of torment.

"But dinner!" she tried. "We were going to go to dinner."

He surveyed her splendidly disordered appearance and smirked. "That was a few hours ago. It is a bit late for dinner, now. If you are hungry, I am sure that the house-elves will feed you when you get in."

Hermione hated whinging, but really! He couldn't just *do this* to her and then leave her! She was ready to jump out of her skin — how could he bring her this far and *abandon* her? "I don't *want* to go back," she whispered.

Severus relented somewhat, his tenderness for her overriding his ornery bent. He held out his hands to her and she joined him on his bench seat, wrapping her arms about him



and burying her face in his shoulder as he held her close.

"It won't be long, Hermione. If your father gives his consent, we can be married as soon as you wish."

"Oh, Severus," she said, reaching up to twine her arms about his neck and to press kisses to his face.

Thus it was that when the limousine arrived at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, Hermione was forced to wait a moment for him to join her on the stoop.

"Shall I get the door for you, sir?" the driver inquired through the console speaker.

"No need," Severus replied, unpeeling Hermione from his body and urging her to open the car door. When she had climbed out and turned to look in at him, he gave her pained smile. "I'll be with you directly," he said, reflecting that the child had no clue what state she put him in if she thought he could jump out of the car and walk around in this condition.

In the entrance hall, after dismissing Winky, she made a sad face at him. "I suppose we go to our rooms now?"

He pinched her chin. "You will go to your room, and I will Floo to the Estuary."

Now she looked dismayed. "You're not going to stay here?"

Though he was not touching her with his hands, the weight of his gaze upon her, and the craving in his eyes made her feel as if she were once again wrapped in his

embrace. "No, Hermione. Dumbledore is here to resume his role as chaperone. And it will be easier for us both to sleep if we are doing so under separate roofs."

The shining smile she gave him at this confession gave him the urge to kiss her again.

"Severus?"

Minerva McGonagall appeared on the landing. "I see you found Hermione," she said dryly, eying their untidy appearances askance. "Come up, please."

Rolling his eyes expressively, Severus allowed Hermione to precede him up the stairs. They entered the sitting room to find Dumbledore in conversation with Tonks and Lupin, who were sitting on a love seat, fingers entwined.

Snape raised his eyebrows. "Something you perhaps forgot to mention to me?" he murmured to Hermione.

She giggled. "Just that Tonks and Remus kissed and made up," she whispered back.

Dumbledore stood when he heard the whispering and he smiled at the newcomers. "Kissed, made up, and became engaged," he corrected. "I see that Hermione has survived the promised strangulation."

Minerva threw Dumbledore a quelling look, as Hermione looked questioningly at Severus.

Tonks, who felt she had a score to settle, said, "Oh! Is *that* what you children are calling it nowadays?"

Eager to divert attention from the state of his and Hermione's appearance, Severus offered his congratulations to Lupin with great alacrity. Not only did this engagement satisfy Ted Tonks' request that his daughter be looked after, but it tied Lupin up quite neatly so that Severus would no longer have to endure the sight of the werewolf mauling Hermione. What could be better?

Lupin readily shook Severus' hand, then looked sharply from Severus to Hermione. "Did you have something to tell us as well, Severus?"

Severus turned to Hermione and held out his hand; she felt the flush as it flooded her face and she obediently crossed the floor to take his hand. She was unbelievably proud to be seen with him as a couple, but she was also a tad embarrassed to think that these people might know that she and Severus had been wrestling in the back seat of a limousine for the last several hours.

Then she saw the dark purple love bite on the back of Tonks' neck and she stopped worrying about it. Apparently, wrestling and snogging occurred amongst all couples — even the prim, proper Sophronia had been helpless in the arms of her Sirius. Hermione smiled and darted a glance at Severus from the corner of her eyes; he gave her a look which promised retribution if she did not straighten up and behave.

"Miss Delacour and I have agreed that we do not suit,"

Severus said, addressing the room at large. "I will be speaking with Hermione's parents tomorrow to ask their permission for us to marry — which reminds me! I have a notice to write; excuse me."

Severus moved to the writing desk in the corner, where he grabbed a quill and parchment and began to write. McGonagall approached and laid a hand upon Hermione's arm. "I would be seriously alarmed about this if I had not been aware of your attachment since the Malfoy ball."

Severus' looked up from his task, his face registering shock. "What do you mean?"

"It was when you danced with the girl in the faerie silk gown, Severus," Minerva told him gently. "You knew your heart's desire, did you not?"

"The flame-coloured gown?" Dumbledore murmured. Minerva nodded to him, and their eyes locked, and held.

Severus stood from the desk, calling softly for Dobby, who popped into the room. Instructing the house-elf to immediately send the letter by owl to the DAILY PROPHET offices, he looked up to find Hermione had walked away from the others, into the corner with him. An idea came to him, and he raised an eyebrow at her.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered.

He slipped his hand into the pocket of his mack, bring-

ing forth a bar of Honeyduke's dark chocolate. "May it minister to your needs," he told her as he placed it in her hand.

"...because it tastes just like your voice sounds," she murmured provocatively.

"Stop it, you unprincipled wench, or I will never get out of here, tonight."

Doubt assailed her. "How do I know you'll come back?" she whispered.

Severus' eyes darted about the room, noting that the other occupants were speaking amongst themselves. "Hermione..." he entreated her, wanting to sweep her into his arms to reassure her, but too reserved to do so before these witnesses. He began to pat his pockets, pulling from one a tiny golden key.

"It's to my Gringotts vault," he told her, placing it in the palm of her hand and closing her fingers over it. "I will come back for it tomorrow."

"Oh, no!" she whispered, pushing it back into the pocket from whence it had come. "I could never take your bank key!"

He stiffened in some alarm and grabbed her wrist, not wishing to be seen with her hand in his trousers pocket. Slowly, he withdrew her hand, which emerged with Fleur's jewels clutched in her fingers.

For a moment, Hermione stared uncomprehendingly at the emeralds in her hand, then looked back into Severus'

face with something like an accusation in her eyes.

"Don't be daft," he said to her gruffly, removing the offending items from her hand and placing them back in his pocket. He bent to place his lips by her ear, and growled, "Only rubies for *my* lioness."

Then she impulsively threw her arms about his neck, and his resolve to show no display of affection before the others dissolved.

"Nor here, nor there, find any refuge from thee," he murmured to her, taking her hand and leading her to the hearth.

With a bit of a self-deprecating smile, Severus took a handful of Floo powder from the box on the mantel. "I'll be here tomorrow for the chocolate bar wrapper," he promised her. "I need a bookmark." Then he tossed the powder into the fireplace, saying, "Severus Snape's bedroom, the Estuary."

Just before the Floo activated, he caught Hermione's speculative eye and read her perfectly. "Don't even *think* about it," he said, and whirled away.

"Think about what?" Remus said with a small frown.

Tonks, however, grinned and linked arms with Hermione. "Told you no, did he?"

Hermione nodded morosely. "He said we'll be married soon enough."

Tonks' happy lilting laugh brought Remus' warm eyes to her face, and caused Dumbledore and McGonagall to look

up from their reminiscences. “Well, you’ll only be married once, you know — and hopefully you’ll do the *other* thing more than once.”

McGonagall spoke in a shocked tone. “Nymphadora!”

The laughter of the others in the room, and the knowledge that they were laughing with her, rather than at her, still did not keep Hermione from flushing crimson once again.

With a suddenness she was not expecting, the exhaustion from the most important day of her life washed through her body, and though she doubted that she would sleep, she longed for the privacy and comfort of her own room. Excusing herself to the others, she exited the sitting room and started up the stairs, clutching her treasure, wrapped in a Honeyduke’s label.

SEVERUS OPENED his eyes the next morning and realised there was a kink in his back. Shifting slightly, it dawned upon him that he was not in his bed. He sat up and rubbed his neck, grimacing at the discomfort. The night before, after

leaving Hermione, he had come into the private library he had built for her and sat upon the love seat, permitting himself to daydream. He imagined being here with her, seeing the look on her face when he showed the room to her, sitting in the big armchair with her cradled in his lap whilst he read poetry to her, raising the hem on that flame-coloured negligee and tugging off her knickers and making love to her on the chaise lounge...

Enough of that! He was meeting with his father-in-law-to-be this evening, and there were things to be done besides remembering how she had tasted when he kissed her mouth, and how she whimpered when he caressed her — important things he had to do — and how sweetly she returned his caresses, twining her fingers in the hair castigated by others as *greasy*, wriggling her bum deliberately in his lap while nuzzling his ear and whispering to him how attractive he was to her, how she had dreamt of him ever since their night in the cabin, how she had wanted him to hold her and kiss her and claim her for his own ...

He was never going to get *anything* done. All he was good for was lazing about like a love-sick moon-calf.

A love-sick moon-calf whose wife-to-be was waiting for him to come and see her this morning!

Moving with sudden speed, Severus strode into the bathroom to shower, shave, and prepare to meet his day — and his love.

Hermione awoke slowly, drifting from dreams into wakefulness with a self-satisfied purr and stretch, which would have done Crookshanks proud. The night before, Severus Snape had seized her and kissed her into utter senselessness and nothing had ever felt so divine. Whereas before she had been determined to win him as her husband and had bent all of her energy towards making that happen, now she was obsessed with him as a fire contorts into conflagration; he burned within her very blood as it coursed through her veins and she was utterly consumed by him.

Experimentally, she ran her hands over her form in its simple cotton nightdress, thinking of the ways he had stroked her and evoked such luscious sensations from her body, bringing about a dissolution of reason and igniting an inferno of the flesh that she had been unable to appease before falling into dreams as dominated by his presence as her mind was dominated by the thought of him.

Sitting up, she ran an experimental hand through her hair, mentally determining how much attention it would require this morning to attain some degree of acceptable appearance. He had said he would return for the sweets wrapper, but he had not said when he would do so. What if he was planning to join them for breakfast?

Darting a panicked look to the clock on her bedside table, Hermione climbed from the bed and hurried to the bathroom to prepare for her day.

Stormy was picking lackadaisically at her fried egg, missing the busy morning bustle to which she had grown accustomed at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Her sisters and Ginny Weasley were at Ginny's home, visiting with the Weasley family; Alicia was in Ireland, visiting with Seamus' family; Tonks had left early, with Professor Lupin, for a shopping expedition in Diagon Alley; Hermione was sleeping unusually late; Mummy had spent the night away, attending to business, whatever *that* meant; Sirius, who was *always* there for breakfast, had not shown up; Fletcher had disappeared again, though he always came back, even if Crookshanks had to find him and bring him back; Stormy was left to the company of Auntie Min, Professor Dumbledore, and her own boredom.

There was a motion in the corner of her eye and she turned to see her mummy, looking so pretty and smiling at her.

"Mummy!" Stormy cried, rising from her chair and hurling herself into her mother's waiting arms.

Sophonra knelt to receive the child, stroking her fine corn silk hair with a tender touch. "Good morning, pre-

cious," she whispered.

Dumbledore rose from his place at the head of the table and approached them. "I don't believe we've met since you left school, Mrs. —" Minerva McGonagall cleared her throat in a meaningful manner and Dumbledore cast a thankful glance her way before finishing, "Mrs. Snape. I don't need to ask how you are getting on; I can see you are in fine fettle."

Sophronia rose and accepted the proffered hand. "Good morning, Headmaster. Yes, I am very well, thank you. I hope your trip from the Continent was pleasant?"

Dumbledore answered her smilingly, offering a seat at the table.

"Actually, I have already eaten this morning," Sophronia said. "I wish to speak with Stormy. Have you finished eating, love?"

Stormy agreed that she was finished and happily accompanied her mother out of the dining room and up the stairs, to the nursery.

"Where were you, Mummy?" Stormy asked, swinging her mother's hand joyfully.

"I'm going to tell you all about it, sweetness," Sophronia responded, standing back to allow Stormy to enter the nursery first.

"Sirius!" Stormy said, running up to give him a hug. "Where have you been?" After a moment, a frown marred

the little face. "Were you and Mummy in the same place?"

Sirius smiled crookedly over her head at Sophronia. "Can't keep a secret from this one," he murmured.

Sophronia sat down upon the rug, so that Stormy was standing between them. "Stormy, you know how everyone has to get married?"

Stormy nodded. "Skye is marrying Bill and Shadow is marrying Ron and Severus is marrying icky old Fleur and..." Another frown. "Mummies don't have to get married, do they? You're already married to Papa."

Sophronia reached out and stroked Stormy's cheek. "Well, love, your papa is gone, and I, too, am required by the law to marry."

Stormy's lower lip protruded slightly. "Mr. Malfoy wanted to marry you, didn't he?"

"He may have meant to ask me, sweetheart; I don't know. But I did not love Mr. Malfoy, and I could not have married him."

Stormy sat down and leant against Sophronia, whose arms immediately pulled her into a comforting hug. "Mummies love daddies," Stormy said, working it out in her own mind. "But what happens when daddies die?"

Sophronia's eyes filled with tears and she looked imploringly at Sirius, as she struggled not to cry. Coming to the rescue, Sirius said, "What do you think happens, Stormy?"

Stormy studied Sirius speculatively, her mind turning behind cornflower-blue eyes. Sirius was reminded rather disconcertingly of her older brother, and his finger went instinctively to loosen the collar of his robes. After a moment, Stormy said, "I think that sometimes, mummies love someone else after daddies die." Unerringly, Stormy's accusing glance travelled to Sirius' left hand, where his new wedding ring was proudly displayed. "You married my mummy," she said flatly.

Sirius met her eyes unflinchingly. "I did marry your mummy, Stormy. I love her so much. I hope you won't be too angry with me."

"You played with me and gave me pocket money and were nice to me just because you love Mummy," she said, with Snape-like finality.

Now Stormy was on the receiving end of Sirius' crooked smile. "No, you monkey," he said with great sincerity, knowing that the future of his relationship with her depended on convincing her of the truth of his words. "I played with you and gave you pocket money and was nice to you because I like you very much and wanted to be your friend — even if your mum *wouldn't* marry me."

Stormy stared at him for what seemed an eternity to the adults who hung upon her judgement; neither Sophronia nor Sirius took a breath as they awaited her pronounce-

ment. "Can I call you Dad?" Stormy asked, finally.

Sirius let out a great bark of laughter. "I think I would like that very much, Stormy," he told her.

Stormy giggled. "Will you be Skye's and Shadow's and Severus' dad, too?"

"Well," he answered carefully, "I will be Skye's and Shadow's *stepfather*, but Severus isn't your mum's child, so I won't be related to *him*."

Stormy was becoming excited, now. "Where will we live? At Phoenix House?"

"We will have a house of our very own, Stormy," Sophronia said, having recovered the use of her voice. "Sirius and I are working to get the house all ready for you to come and live there."

"Can I have pink walls in my room?" she asked. "And a pink rug?"

Sirius leaned towards her confidentially. "And a pink canopy over your bed!" he promised.

Stormy jumped up and danced around the room. "I think Mummy and I are going to *like* being married to you, Sirius!" Sophronia and Sirius both laughed at her remark, and Stormy paused then, looking at Sirius shyly from beneath her lashes. "I mean — Dad," she amended.

Sophronia suddenly groped for a handkerchief in her pocket, and Sirius watched the child with wonder, mar-

velling at her dead accurate replication of one of Sophronia's signature coquettish looks.

"I'm going to like it, too, Stormy," he admitted, his larynx unexpectedly tight with emotion. Swallowing past the lump there, he cleared his throat and added, "Now, there's something I need to explain to you about Fletcher.."



Hermione put the final touches to her makeup with hands wont to tremble. She had already been downstairs to seek out any breakfast visitors, only to be told by McGonagall, "No, Hermione, we haven't seen Severus this morning." She had returned to her room to perfect her appearance, becoming more doubtful with each passing moment that he was going to return.

She was tempted to believe that it had *all* been a very life-like dream, but the very faint soreness in her wrists from his attempts to restrain her from flailing at him the night before told her that it had happened. It was still possible, however, that he had thought better of the madness of loving her — of all but *making* love to her — and had determined that he would not compound his error by appearing and encouraging her in her delusions.

The thought that he would not come, not ever again, hurt with a physical ache that brought her arms protec-



tively around herself as she began to rock in her seat, willing herself not to cry and botch her makeup.

She answered the knock on her door without thinking, working out in her mind how she would flee England to spare herself the necessity of marrying someone she did not love. She could surely find a position in ...

"Miss?"

Winky was peering up at her with some concern.

"Yes, Winky?" she replied absently.

"Miss Hermione, Professor Snape is downstairs saying Miss has his bookmark and the Professor is wanting it," Winky blurted.

Hermione did not stay to ask further questions; she snatched the Honeydukes wrapper from her bedside table and flew down the staircase.

Severus was standing just inside the first floor sitting room, his own doubts jostling one another about in his mind, but it was all forgotten as the girl hurled herself at him. He caught her with a chuckle, allowing them both to fall upon the sofa behind him.

"Perhaps I should acquire protective gear," he murmured, reflecting that it was a good thing no one else had been occupying the sitting room. The child needed instruction in how to behave, but he did not have the heart to impart it to her when she so desperately needed to be kissed.



Recovering from said kiss, Hermione buried her nose in his freshly shampooed hair, breathing in the conflicting herbal scent of the shampoo and the musky scent of his shaving lotion, and she pressed a kiss behind his ear before placing her lips there and whispering, "It wasn't a dream."

Severus tightened his grip upon her. "It happened, Hermione — but that does not mean it is not a dream, all the same."

Her chuckle was a delightful sound, uttered as it was with her face buried in his neck. He pulled his head back from hers, reaching to tilt her chin and so that he could claim her lips again, but was interrupted by a voice from the doorway.

"Severus, what are you doing cuddling Hermione?"

The two lovers fell apart a bit guiltily and turned as one to confront Stormy, who stood in the doorway with the sweets wrapper in her hand.

"You are supposed to cuddle with Fleur, not with Hermione," Stormy complained, frowning. "The wrong people can't kiss and hug; it's not right."

Severus stood and approached Stormy, searching his mind for an appropriate explanation for an eight year old. "May I have the sweets wrapper, please?" he asked, stalling for time.

Stormy looked up at him, offering the wrapper. "Fleur

will be angry, Severus, and you don't want for Fleur to be angry with Hermione. She's *mean* when she's angry."

Severus nodded gravely, placing the sweets wrapper in his wallet, which he then returned to his inner coat pocket. "Was Fleur unpleasant to you?" he asked.

Stormy's head bobbed. "Sometimes," she agreed.

Severus offered his hand to Stormy and she took it, allowing him to lead her to the sofa, where Hermione moved over so that Stormy could sit in the middle. Severus said, "Fleur was disagreeable to me, as well, Stormy. She and I decided that we did not wish to be married to one another."

Stormy cocked her head to one side. "Fleur isn't going to be my sister?" When Severus shook his head in the negative, Stormy threw her arms around him. "That makes everything perfect!" she crowed.

"Does it?" he inquired, somewhat confused.

Stormy bounced up, turning to include Hermione in the conversation. "Sirius is my new dad!" she announced.

"Is he?" Hermione asked, feigning surprise. "Do you like that?"

Stormy nodded enthusiastically. "Yes — but he's not Severus' dad, because Mummy isn't Severus' real mum." Stormy turned back to her brother with a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry, Severus."

Severus attempted to look sorrowful. "It's all right,

Stormy. I'm all grown up, now. I don't need a father as much as you do."

Stormy perked up at his logic. "No, you don't!" she agreed. Another frown crossed her face. "But you *do* have to get married, Severus, Mummy told me you do. And you quarrelled with Fleur — *now* what are you going to do?" Stormy turned to Hermione, her sure ally in all problem solving. "We have to find someone for Severus to marry, Hermione."

Hermione smiled at her. "I'll bet he can find someone all by himself," she said.

Stormy looked doubtful. "Severus is shy," she announced with great authority.

"I am *not*," her ungrateful brother snorted behind her.

Stormy turned back to him, her hands fisted and resting on her non-existent hips. "If Nanny says you're shy, then you're shy," she insisted.

Severus opened his mouth to argue, but he caught Hermione's minatory expression and changed his mind. "Stormy, how would it be if I married Hermione instead?" he asked.

Stormy's mouth dropped open. "You can't do that!" she objected. "Severus, you're really *old!* And Hermione is just a *teenager!*"

Hermione recognized the tempestuous signs on her beloved's face and she took over the explanation. "Stormy, sometimes people marry someone who is not their same

age," she said soothingly. "I know it is odd of me, but I really *like* your brother."

"Thank you *very* much," Severus muttered forebodingly, but no one was listening to him.

Hermione saw the indecision in Stormy's face. "At least he's not an icky old boy," she pointed out. "And, I would really, really like to be your sister, Stormy," she added.

Stormy reached out and took Hermione's hand. "But do you want to hug and kiss him?" she asked, confused.

Hermione nodded. "Yes, I do."

Stormy capitulated. "Okay, but I don't understand."

Hermione laughed and hugged the little girl. "It'll be good; you'll see," she promised.

Stormy returned the hug with true affection, then another thought occurred to her. "Guess what?" she asked, turning to include her forgotten brother in the conversation. "Fletcher is a girl, and she had babies!"

A scowl crossed Severus' face. "That reminds me," he said, reaching into his coat pocket and withdrawing a humming purple Puffling.

"Pretty!" Stormy exclaimed, holding out her hands for it. "Where did you get him?"

Severus ignored the question, saying, "His name is Mortimer," and relinquishing the Puffling into Stormy's hands. "I believe he would enjoy the company of Fletcher's babies."

Stormy received the Puffling with pleasure. “Mummy and Sirius said I can see all the Pufflings this weekend when I go to live at my new house,” she said. “They’re there now, getting my room ready for me. Will you come see my new room when I move there, Hermione?”

Hermione nodded, smiling lovingly at the child. “I’ll come,” she promised.



Mike and Carol Granger had been pounced upon by their daughter when they walked in the door that afternoon. Hermione had informed them of the guest they would receive that evening, as well as her expectations of their behaviour towards the visitor, then she had permitted them to have a bit of a lie-down.

Mike was not terribly pleased that Carol would not permit the lie-down to consist of actually *sleeping*. No, she wanted to discuss Hermione’s bombshell.

Exhaustively.

“She told us she was going to have to marry months ago, Mike – it’s not as if that was news.”

“I’m not disputing that,” he grumbled, hitting his pillow with a fist and thinking that those lucky sods with bedrooms separate from their wives could sleep when it took their fancy.



“And she told me back in June that she was in love with a man who had become engaged to another woman. It was when she and I went to the spa, you remember?”

He sighed. “Yes...”

“She went to all the trouble to learn how to tame her hair and to apply makeup, just like a general planning a war — I was proud of her for being so adult about it and I encouraged her to fight for what she wanted.”

Mike sat up suddenly. “You *encouraged* her to run after a bloke twenty years older than she is?”

Carol had the grace to look sheepish. “I told her to go after her man — it didn’t occur to me that her man might also be her *teacher*.” She stared at the ceiling light fixture for a moment, plucking at the duvet with her fingers. “But he is the man who rescued her last autumn when she was taken by those terrorists, Mike. He risked his own life. And I’ve seen the articles in their newspaper; the man is considered to be a hero of that war, just as Hermione is.”

“It sounds to me like some filthy-minded pervert who has no business teaching children wants to get his hands on my baby girl, Caro.”

Now Carol sat up. “I don’t think it’s fair to say that. He refused to see her socially until she left school; it sounds to me as if he was determined *not* to be inappropriate with a student, Mike.”



Mike snorted in exasperation. “I can’t see a way out of it, Caro. Hermione has to be married because of the so-called Ministry for Magic, she’s determined to stay in that world, and at least this fellow sounds like he might be rich — an estate with servants in Hampshire, no less. She seems dead set on having him. What can we do?”

Carol slanted a glance at her husband of twenty-five years. “What could our parents do when we decided to be married?”

“Not a bloody thing,” her spouse responded, reaching for her. “If you’re not going to let me sleep, I am afraid I will have to take inappropriate liberties.”

“I thought you would never take the hint,” his unrepentant spouse replied, pulling him down into the sheets.



Severus sat in the backseat of the limousine, periodically assuring himself that he was *not* nervous. Mr. Swift had been happy, if somewhat surprised, to have received word from him again so soon —

“The *same* house, sir?”

“Yes, where we went last night.”

“And will the young lady be going with us, sir?”

“The young lady *lives* there, Mr. Swift.”

“Of course she does, sir. And will we be driving all



about town tonight?”

“Just say what you want to say, Swift.”

“I’m a father myself, sir. What are your intentions towards the young lady?”

“I’m going there tonight to ask her father’s permission to marry her, Swift — does that meet with *your* approval?”

“It does indeed, sir!”

“Excellent. And are there any other questions I can answer for you? Would you, perhaps, like to have an accounting of my circumstances and how I intend to support her?”

The grinning Mr. Swift had swiftly disclaimed the desire for any such information, and had been the picture of professional discretion when he arrived around the corner from Grimmauld Place to pick up the Potions master and to convey him to Islington that evening.

Severus had left Hermione soon after the conclusion of their discussion with Stormy, promising to meet her at her parents’ home that evening at seven. They had agreed not to attempt to share a meal at this first meeting, so Severus had only to explain to these Muggles why he wanted to marry their teenage daughter and how he meant to provide for her. How differently than wizards could the Muggles possibly conduct such negotiations? Hermione had explained that modern Muggle manners did not require the asking of the parents’ permission, nor the disclosure



of financial information — she had even suggested that they should simply be married as Sirius and Sophronia had done, dropping in at the Ministry for Magic, and that they inform her parents of it after the fact.

Such a notion affronted Severus' sense of dignity, and did not at all suit his idea of what was due to Hermione's consequence, as the woman of his choice. He made many allowances in his mind for the fact that she was Muggle-born, and that she was also very young; it would be all but impossible for her to understand the insult to herself that such a wedding would imply, coming so quickly on the heels of the announcement of the break-up with Fleur. He could at least be thankful that Hermione was willing to accept his judgment in this matter without fighting him about it. He intended to marry his Muggle-born witch with all the pomp and circumstance at his disposal. He could not prevent the gossips from suggesting that Hermione had been the cause of the broken engagement with Fleur, but he would not have her appearing to be the second-best candidate for his hand in marriage. He must, therefore, make sure that his wedding to Hermione, in spite of the short time he had in which to plan it, would outshine the planned nuptials with Fleur in every particular.

Arriving at the Granger home, Severus allowed Mr. Swift to open the door for him and stood for a moment in the

street, making sure that the Muggle suit which Hermione had suggested that he wear to this meeting was hanging properly and that the necktie was in place. She had said he would seem less alien and intimidating to her parents if he dressed as a Muggle; he could only hope she was right.



Hermione impatiently paced the hallway, feeling more nervous than Crookshanks on his worst day. She had done all she could to prepare her parents for meeting with Severus, explaining her beloved's scruples to them and begging their patience for however odd his ideas might seem to them. This was, surely, the last hurdle she would have to pass to become engaged to Severus, was it not?

When she heard the limousine in front of the house, she threw open the door and went onto the porch, closing the door behind her. Severus walked up the path to her, his straight-backed bearing and piercing black gaze striking her to weak-kneed confusion from several feet away; how could she hide her obvious befuddlement in his presence from her parents?

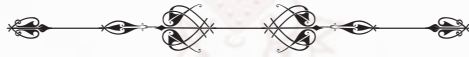
Though he did not smile, the softening of the firm line of his lips and the warmth in his eyes were enough to undo her resolutions of sane behaviour; she wrapped her arms about him as he joined her on the porch, pressing herself to him.

"You look so good," she said, rubbing her cheek on the lapel of the suit coat.

Severus permitted himself to stroke her hair once before compelling her to release him with one firm hand upon her shoulder. "If you are a good girl, there may be time for hugging *after* we have met with your parents, Hermione. I refuse, however, to meet them in a state of disorder."

She sighed deeply, looking up into his eyes. "There had *better* be time for it," she grumped, and was gratified with the glimmer of a smile.

"Once more into the breach, my friends," he murmured, urging her forward.



The Grangers stood to meet the visitor when Hermione led him into the back sitting room. The stranger was a tall fellow, with a gaunt, austere face; shoulder-length black hair; an over-large, hawkish nose; well-formed, thin lips; and glittering black eyes. He bore himself like an aristocrat and he executed a rather formal bow to Carol before offering his hand to Mike.

Carol wasted no time once they were seated. "Professor, we can never thank you enough for saving Hermione when she was taken by those Death Dealers!"

"Death Eaters, Mum," Hermione hissed.



Severus was surprised to have such an easy beginning to the conversation. "It was my privilege to do so," he assured Mrs. Granger sincerely.

Mike watched him closely for a moment before blurt-ing out, "If you and Hermione have been interested in one another since the kidnapping, then why did you become engaged to another woman, Professor?"

Severus looked Hermione's father squarely in the face. "I think that's a fair question, Mr. Granger, and I respect you for asking it." Severus transferred his gaze to Hermione's face. "As much as I wanted to be with Hermione, I did not believe that I could ever deserve her. I also did not believe it was possible that she would choose me over a man closer to her age."

Hermione reached a hand to touch his face. "I never wanted anyone else, Severus," she murmured. "I never will."

Mike spoke again. "Well, Professor, our girl has told us why she wants you — but why would you choose her? She's a wilful puss, you know. I wouldn't think she would suit a man of your stamp."

Severus raised one eyebrow at Mr. Granger's inference, but had to admit to himself that it was another reasonable question. "She is spirited, Mr. Granger, and utterly engaging. I find Hermione to be highly intelligent and fascinating; with Hermione in my life, there will never



be a dull moment.” He slanted a glance at Hermione, who had the grace to blush, though she reached to him, almost involuntarily, and he took her hand in his own. “She is courageous, loyal, and fearless,” he continued, his gaze now on Hermione’s face, rather than her father’s. “When my eight year old sister was taken ill, Hermione nursed her until she was well again. With my own eyes, I have seen Hermione stand over the body of a fallen comrade, guarding him, heedless of her own safety, in the midst of a fierce battle. I don’t know of a woman who is her equal.”

Carol glanced at Mike in a pitying way; apparently, she was sold. “Why did you come here?” Mike asked, annoyed. “Hermione’s of full legal age, Snape. You could have married her any time you wanted and dropped us a postcard about it.”

A rare smile graced Severus’ lips. “So Hermione keeps telling me,” he admitted. “Mr. Granger, in the wizarding world, honour demands that a man make his suit to the family of the woman he hopes to take as his wife. It gives him the opportunity to divulge his means and to discuss with her parents the practical aspects of the ways in which he intends to care for his wife after they are married.”

Carol rose from her seat with a suddenness which startled her daughter and husband. “I think it’s time for some tea. Mike will help me in the kitchen. Hermione, why don’t you show Severus about the garden?”

In the kitchen, she began to set things on the tea tray with annoyed snaps of the wrist.

“What?” Mike demanded.

“What is your problem?”

“Do you want grandchildren who look like that? What does she see in him?”

She gaped at him. Then she laughed softly. “You men are so blind,” she murmured. “That man is sex on legs, Mike. He’s gainfully employed, he is a property owner, he is a decorated war hero — and, on top of that, he worships her. We would be fools to interfere.”

Over the tea tray, Carol engaged Hermione in a discussion of wizarding wedding customs, while Mike brought out a bottle of brandy and suggested that he “warm” Severus’ tea. The two men perused the financial statement which Severus had produced from an inner coat pocket, and Mike asked astute questions, which showed his keen business sense. When they parted, it was on terms of amity.

“You two have our blessing,” Mike stated as he and Carol stood at the door, seeing Severus and Hermione out of the house.

Hermione clung to Severus in the back seat of the limousine as they travelled north, out of town; he held her to

his side with a grip of iron, using his free hand to stroke up and down her back restfully.

Severus had smoothly gained her father's permission to take her out, solicitously inquiring as to her curfew, which drew from her a huff of annoyance and from her father a chuckle of enjoyment. Once in the limousine, he had shrugged out of the suit coat and removed the necktie, placing them neatly on the facing bench seat. Now they were heading for a destination which he declined to disclose to her, and Hermione felt as if she had been through a skirmish nearly as exhausting as the battle at the Estuary; it was a relief to her to sag against Severus and allow him to soothe her fragile nerves.

Soon, the limousine came to a halt on the side of the road and Mr. Swift communicated to them with the console speaker. "I will wait here for you, sir."

Before Hermione could inquire, Severus said, "Put both of your arms around me; we are going to Disapparate."

Hermione held tightly to him, experiencing the familiar sensations of Side-Along Apparition, until she felt another seat beneath them and opened her eyes to see their location.

They were in a room that seemed vaguely familiar, though it was largely bare and derelict-looking. They were seated upon a sofa, pulled up close to a brightly burning fire. The only other light in the room came from candles

burning upon the mantelpiece. Between the sofa and the hearth there was a small, beautifully crafted cherry wood table, upon which rested a silver tray which held an iced wine bucket and two crystal flutes. On the floor before the sofa, a thick rug of dark green wool rested upon the otherwise bare floorboards.

Severus looked around at the few furnishings and saw that all he had requested had been done; looking over Hermione's head, to the corner of the room, he nodded once to Nanny, who nodded back to him before snapping her fingers and disappearing with a barely-audible popping sound.

"Where are we?" Hermione asked, looking about curiously.

Severus released his hold upon her, leaning back a bit in his seat and allowing himself to inwardly gloat over his prize. She had dressed for their interview with her parents, wearing a very feminine white blouse tucked into a flaring crimson skirt; her corkscrew curls fell loose about her face and down her back. She was very beautiful to him, limned by the firelight; his relief over the resolution of the issue with her parents permitted his desire for her to return to the forefront, and he viewed her as a feast to be relished.

"Why don't you explore and see if you can work it out?" he suggested, his voice a silky purr.

Hermione stood and turned around to view the room; she noted the positions of the windows and the doorways,

then turned back to Severus, her face alight with wonder.

“It’s the cabin,” she said

“It is, indeed,” he agreed with her.

Hermione sat again on the sofa, her eyes trained on his face. “But why have you brought us here?”

Severus allowed his gaze to travel from her face down her body, not attempting to hide from her his appreciation of what he saw; by the time his eyes reached her face again, they were burning with an intensity which fairly took her breath away.

“I have some things to say to you, Hermione, and I wanted to say them here, where it all began.”

Hermione’s brain began to spin, wondering what he could possibly have to say to her, after all they had shared together in the last two days; how they had held one another and kissed so passionately, how they had stood together before her parents and gained consent for their marriage — what more needed to be said?

“When we spent that night in this room, I came here as an angry, put-upon teacher, called upon to rescue and safeguard a student.” He sat forward then, drawing closer to her. “Sometime in the night watches, as you wrapped yourself around me in complete trust and confidence that I would bring us both safely away from our adventure, I became just a lonely man, confronted with a bounty the likes of which I would never deserve or possess.”

At the pain in his voice, Hermione murmured and moved against him, reaching a hand to caress his hair soothingly. Severus’ mouth quirked slightly and he paused to press a gentle kiss to her forehead before he continued to speak.

“The totality of who you are, in your intelligence and courage and stubbornness, slew me where I sat, holding you in my arms and immersed in your scent. I desired you — desired all of you — and I hated myself for having such feelings for you. The next morning, when you smiled at me, and called me by my given name, I was all but undone. I moved away from you, sought to keep myself at a distance from you, but you would not let me go. I foolishly agreed to see you socially once you left school, and I was a total failure at ignoring you once we returned to Hogwarts. I was constantly aware of you, watching you, thinking of you, and completely unsure of your regard for me. Every time I saw you speaking or laughing or dancing with one of your classmates, I was consumed with jealousy and further convinced that you could never want me.”

Hermione protested wordlessly, leaning up to press a kiss his lips; he responded to her tenderly, kissing her with a gentle adoration she had not before encountered from him. Ending the kiss, he looked into her eyes and spoke again.

“It took a near-death experience for me to finally know what your feelings were, and had been, all along. I knew I had

been a fool, and I worked to do everything in my power to correct my wrongs, to give myself the right to speak to you.”

Hermione was shifted slightly to one side as Severus moved; before she was aware of his actions, he had slipped down to kneel upon the rug at her feet. He took her left hand between both of his own and looked her squarely in the eye.

“I love you, Hermione. I began to love you in this room, and I have never ceased to love you or to aspire one day to have the right to call you my own. Will you make me the happiest of men by becoming my wife?”

Hermione was frozen in her position on the sofa, looking down into his beloved, fierce gaze, amazed to hear such words of love from him. She knew his feelings, but had never expected him to put them so succinctly into words, and she felt a momentary flash of shame for having underestimated him.

“Yes,” she said simply, feeling the lump rising in her throat. “It is the only thing I have thought of since *I* began to love *you* in this room, Severus.”

He reached into an inner pocket and brought out a small black velvet box, which he had brought home at the same time he had obtained the pearl bracelet. With a surprisingly steady hand, he opened the box, which he presented to Hermione. “This is what I have chosen for you, Hermione. Does it meet with your approval?”

Hermione stared at the large rectangular ruby, flanked by two smaller, rectangular diamonds, all of the jewels flashing in the firelight. Overcome with emotion, tears flooded her eyes as she mutely nodded her head. Severus pulled the ring from its box and took her left hand, slipping the ring onto her third finger with solemn reverence. He then removed his wand from his sleeve and held it to the ring, bending his head and pressing a kiss to the ring as it rested on her finger, murmuring a spell as he did so; the ring glowed golden for a moment, then adjusted itself to fit her finger perfectly.

“There,” he said, thrusting the wand back into its sheath. “My betrothed.” He plucked her from the sofa and with one twist, seated himself on the rug, coming to rest with Hermione in his lap. “Say it again,” he commanded, taking a firm grasp of her chin.

“Say what?” she responded, her voice simultaneously full of tears and laughter. She rested her hands on his shoulders, drinking in the sight of his ferocious expression, feeling her heart begin to pound as she wondered what he would do next.

“Tell me you love me,” he adjured her. “*Tell me.*”

Feeling a thrill of power, Hermione looked into his eyes, which seemed to demand and plead at the same time. “Dear God, Severus, can you doubt it?” she asked, sliding her

hands from his shoulders up into the hair at his nape and twining them there. "I love you past reason." She watched how his pupils seemed to dilate at her pronouncement, and for an instant, she felt his helplessness in the snare of her love. With more assurance than she had felt before, she lowered her lips to his, moving his head back to rest against the cushion of the sofa as she kissed him. He acquiesced to her, his hands contenting themselves with stroking up and down her back as he permitted her to do with him as she chose. Hermione placed tiny butterfly kisses at the corner of his mouth, refusing to kiss him fully, dipping down to gently bite his throat, then raising her head to tantalise the other corner of his mouth.

"Tease," he accused her, enjoying her inexpert attentions and deviously beginning to untuck her blouse from the waistband of her skirt.

Ignoring him, she leant up to feather kisses across his eyelids, gasping with surprise when he tumbled her off his lap and onto her back on the rug, moving to pin her wrists at the sides of her head. "Seduction lesson number one," he intoned smugly, kissing one side of her neck. "Never taunt a man who hasn't been properly kissed in a full day. It's like tempting a tiger." He kissed the other side of her neck, then released her wrists, resting on his side beside her, his ebony hair tousled, the open buttons

of the dress shirt showing her the beginnings of his dark chest hair below the jut of his Adam's apple.

He watched her face as the playfulness faded, only to be replaced by yearning. Ignoring his cautioning better nature, he fell upon her with a growl, covering her completely, his teeth lightly scraping her lips in his urge to taste her. In an instant, the glowing embers had erupted again into the inferno which devoured them both. Here, alone in the cabin where first they had pressed their bodies together for warmth, they kissed voraciously as their questing hands and desperate bodies sought to come closer, ever closer to one another — and warmth be damned. For an eternity they kissed, tongues tangling; hands stroking, fondling, seeking; breathing becoming ever more ragged as they attempted to assuage their need for another by the expedient of lips, tongues, and hands.

Shamelessly, Hermione shifted beneath him, feeling the great burning need for his touch. She was immediately drunk on the throbbing ache low in her belly; daringly she allowed her rigidly held legs to relax under him, even as she gently thrust her hips upward, seeking contact where she most longed to feel it.

Severus' much-abused self-discipline stirred when Hermione sought to bring herself into contact with his tented trouser-front; his groan of frustration vibrated through

her chest, vocalized as it was with his lips pressed to the flesh just above her heart, his nose buried in her fragrant cleavage. He had just sought and gained a father's permission to marry his daughter — would his first act then be to take that daughter to an isolated location and ravish her?

"Hermione," he moaned, before wrenching himself from her, struggling into a sitting position and clasping her hands to raise her as well.

"Severus?" she said in confusion, her unfocussed gaze resting on his face. Why did he keep stopping them?

With loving hands, he smoothed her skirt back over her legs and fastened the buttons he had hurriedly unfastened just moments before. Once he had restored as much order as he dared attempt, Severus managed to stand and offered a hand to pull her to her feet.

"Come — we have wine here, to toast our engagement — and then I must deliver you back to your home."

Hermione permitted him to seat her on the sofa and watched with mild interest as he uncorked the sparkling wine with a wave of his wand.

"Foolish wand waving," she murmured provocatively, and he gave her a blatantly appraising stare.

"Do not imagine that because I decline to partake of your loveliness now that I will not exact full and complete payment for every tease and taunt with which you

torment me between now and our wedding night," he promised, pouring out the bubbling wine into the fluted crystal goblets.

"My goodness — you do intend to be a very busy man on our wedding night," she purred wickedly.

"Don't be absurd, Hermione," he answered, seating himself beside her and placing a goblet in her hand. "It will take me *years* to pay you out for all the vexation you have caused me in the last year — but I faithfully promise to settle up in full."

The heat of his glance upheld the sincerity of his pledge. Hermione's mouth ran dry as she considered the methods which he might employ to extract his vengeance. When he followed up this threat with a tender, loving smile, she realised the full extent of his unprincipled perfidy — she was so completely entranced by him that she had no desire to escape.

Severus picked up her left hand and admired his ring upon her finger, before turning the hand and placing a kiss in her palm, allowing her to feel, for just an instant, the tip of his tongue trailing over her flesh. "You have bewitched me, Hermione," he murmured, raising his head to look at her. "I will never let you go."

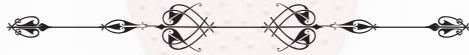
He raised the goblet of sparkling wine to her, waiting until she raised hers as well.

"To us," he said.

"To us," she echoed, and they drank from the glasses until they were empty.

"Ready?" he asked her.

Hermione nodded, and moving as one, they threw the crystal goblets into the fireplace, where they shattered and the shards settled amongst the ashes. As the fragments were embedded in the dying embers of the fire, Severus pulled Hermione into his arms for a last wrenching kiss before escorting her back to her father's home.



Friday afternoon, Mr. Swift arrived promptly at three o'clock to pick up the Grangers to transport them to Hampshire for their weekend stay at the Estuary. Hermione and her mother discussed the guest list for the wedding as her father perused the journal he had brought along; the trip passed comfortably and before long they were pulling up in the Estuary drive.

The door opened and Lorry stood in the doorway bowing and smiling; Mike cast an alarmed look at his wife, who hissed, "House-elves, Mike! Do try to keep up!"

Severus emerged from the house then, wearing the black trousers and forest green shirt Hermione had suggested for him. His warm eyes rested first upon her face, promising a proper greeting later, before he graciously greeted her par-



ents and escorted them into the foyer, keeping up a running commentary on the history of the house as he went.

Sophronia and Sirius met them in the entrance hall, and introductions were made. The Blacks smoothly took the hand-off of the in-laws and led them up the stairwell, explaining that their rooms would be on the family corridor.

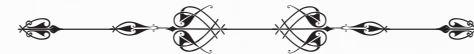
Severus waited for the Grangers to disappear from the first floor landing before dragging Hermione into the blue salon, closing the door in the face of any helpful house-elves and pulling her roughly into his arms.

"Thirty-six hours!" he groaned, kissing her repeatedly; he had not seen her since breakfast the day before.

"It seemed like ninety," she replied, returning his embraces. "Three weeks is an eternity, too," she murmured, referring to their wedding day.

"Eighteen days," he corrected her, pulling away and directing her to the mirror over the mantel. "Sophronia is bringing your parents in here for drinks before dinner; they'll be here any minute."

Sighing with resignation, Hermione pulled a lipstick from her pocket and began to repair the damage inflicted by her impatient — and infuriating — fiancé.



The party from the Burrow Portkeyed in at midday on Sat-



urday, and the reunion was loud and enthusiastic. The Snape girls had to exclaim over their new stepfather, while Harry claimed the right to kiss his new godmother on the cheek.

"...because if you married my godfather, you're my godmother, right?"

Snape stood with a possessive arm about Hermione's waist, watching the Potter brat cozen up to his stepmother. "You'd better watch yourself, Potter. With that kind of reasoning, you could end up related to *me*."

Harry turned then to Severus, mindful of all Ron had told him about Snape over the last week. "Congratulations, sir," he said, offering his hand to his former Potions master.

Severus would probably have shaken Potter's hand even if Hermione had *not* seen fit to pinch him at that moment. "Thank you, Mr. Potter," Severus said solemnly, gripping the boy's hand firmly. "Allow me to congratulate you on your engagement, as well."

Arthur and Molly came up then to shake their hands and congratulate them, and to comment on the odd behaviour of Percy.

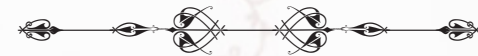
"Gone off to France!" Molly exclaimed, agitated. "He says he's visiting friends, but I never knew of Percy having friends in France! I told him he needs to be at home, looking for a wife, but he says he can look in France as well as he can at home. I don't know what I'm going to do with him!"

Severus had no trouble maintaining his impassive expression, but meeting Bill Weasley's eyes from across the room nearly did him in. They both knew very well what had drawn Percy across the channel.

Hermione was huddled with Skye, Shadow and Ginny, whispering. "The broken engagement was in the papers on Wednesday, but Mum says Percy left for France on Tuesday," Ginny told them. "Do you think he's stupid enough to marry her on the rebound?"

Hermione smiled. "I actually think they would be happy together, Gin — with Fleur's looks and Percy's ambition, he will probably go far in the Ministry, and being successful is as important as being in love, to some people."

Her eyes wandered across the room to light upon the tall, dark, grim-faced man, who looked up as if he could feel her eyes upon him, and his expression lightened to a near-smile as he looked at her.



The guests were thronging the rooms on the ground floor of the Estuary and Sophronia had the satisfaction of knowing that even though her invitations had not gone out until Wednesday, she still managed to lure most of wizarding society to her party by Saturday, in lieu of yet another Ministry function. They were gathered to celebrate the marriage

of Sophronia to Sirius Black, as well as the engagements of the Snape siblings: Severus, Skye, and Shadow.

The guests arrived by Portkey, by Floo, and those who came from outside of London were able to Apparate. Hermione stood with Severus in the entrance hall, next to Sophronia and Sirius, greeting the guests as they arrived. She was introduced as Severus' fiancée and her hand was shaken again and again as dozens of people, including friends, acquaintances and strangers, streamed into the Estuary.

She had been quite surprised to have Severus knock at her door as Nanny was helping her put the finishing touches upon her toilette for that night. Nanny had let him in, and refused to be shooed out, maintaining that it was not proper for him to be there unless Nanny stayed.

"All right," Severus had said, handing Nanny a flat black case, "make yourself useful."

Severus had taken Hermione by the hand and led her to stand before the full length mirror, and then stood behind her, his hands upon her shoulders.

"The gown suits you," he observed, appreciating how the simple gown of metallic gold cloth hugged her breasts before falling from the high waistline to the tips of her matching shoes.

Hermione smiled at his mirror image. "You have good taste — it was sweet of you to have the gown made for me."

He gave her a smirk. "I needed a canvas." Motioning Nanny closer, he buried his nose in the hair at Hermione's temple. "I have an engagement gift for you," he murmured in her ear, sending goose bumps racing over her flesh.

"But, Severus," she objected, "you've given me so many gifts already! My engagement ring and this dress..."

Paying her no heed, he turned to Nanny, who snapped the case open and held it up for him. Removing an item from the case, Severus turned back to Hermione, laying a necklace of blazing rubies and diamonds about her throat and fastening them at her nape.

Hermione gasped. "Severus! These must have cost a fortune!"

"Take it up with my grandfather's grandfather," he suggested snidely. He turned back to Nanny, then returned to Hermione with the matching earrings in his hand. "Can you manage these?" he asked, the dark, silken texture of his voice sending a shaft of pure desire through her body. "Or shall I put them in for you?"

Hermione put the earrings on and surveyed herself in her shimmering gold gown, bedecked like a queen in rubies and diamonds. Severus remained behind her, clad in his customary formal black, with his Order of Merlin pinned to his chest; his face showed enormous satisfaction as he watched her with narrowed eyes.

“My glorious Gryffindor lioness, all in crimson and gold,” he purred.

Now she stood with him at the head of the room, which had been Transfigured by the combined efforts of Severus and Bill from the four separate main salons into a grand ballroom, prepared to open the dancing. Sophronia and Sirius stood at the opposite side of the room, with Skye and Bill to their right, and Shadow and Ron to their left. The music began to play and all four couples swept into the dance.

From the first floor landing, an extremely excited Stormy watched the people she most loved as they danced with their partners, each couple lost in one another’s eyes. Stormy sat with her face pressed to the newels, breathless with wonder, while Nanny stood to one side, keeping a sharp eye upon her charge. The little girl was permitted to watch the first dance, then she was to have a plate of all the finest treats from the refreshment tables, and be off to her bed.

Harry stood with the other guests, watching the four couples dance, and he could not tear his eyes from Hermione. Her long, dark hair was pinned up, with corkscrew tendrils framing her face. Her eyes were fastened to Snape’s face, and he returned her regard with no less avidity. They moved together as if they shared one body. Harry had never seen Hermione so luminous with happiness. She held herself with an elegance Harry could not

reconcile with his image of a slightly podgy, bushy-haired girl with large front teeth who bossed him around in every facet of his life.

It left him speechless.

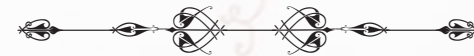
Ginny watched him, a tiny smile on her lips. “She looks happy,” she said mildly.

Harry glanced down into Ginny’s face. “Did you know about them?”

Ginny shook her head. “Tonks said that Dumbledore and McGonagall seemed to know all about it, but no one else had a clue. Do you really mind?”

Other couples began to take the floor and Harry took Ginny into his arms, leading her into the dance. “It’s the last worry from my mind, love.” His green eyes smiled down at her. “I can just be happy now — all of my friends are matched up with someone they love.”

Ginny moved closer to him and held him more tightly, loving him so much she thought her heart would break.



Some time later, Shadow and Skye sat at the side of the room with Carol Granger between them, sipping from cut-glass crystal punch cups and watching those on the dance floor.

“Severus is dancing again,” Shadow said. “Have you ever

seen him dance this much at a party?"

Skye shook her head. "Never. And look at him."

All eyes turned to study Severus' face as he slow-danced with Hermione. She had both arms around him, her cheek pressed to his chest, her eyes closed, the picture of contentment. He looked at her face as they danced, his eyes filled with immeasurable tenderness. They might have been alone in the room, rather than in the midst of wizarding society.

"He never looked at Fleur that way," Shadow said.

Sophronia sat down on Shadow's other side. "But he never claimed that his relationship with Fleur was a love-match, either," she pointed out. "What is between Severus and Hermione cannot be compared to what he had with Fleur."

Carol listened to them with great interest. "Hermione told us that Severus' first engagement was a matter of convenience."

The Snape girls nodded; Shadow took her eyes from her brother and looked at her mother. "Did you know that Severus and Hermione loved one another?"

Sophronia shook her head, smiling at Sirius as he came up to her, bearing two cups of punch. She took hers from him with a word of thanks and turned back to the girls.

"No," Sophronia said. "He could not let his feelings be known when he was engaged to another woman; it would have been wrong."

The song came to an end and Severus and Hermione strolled from the dance floor arm-in-arm, pausing to speak with Draco and Luna Malfoy. Severus kept one hand upon Hermione at all times; even when he appeared to be entirely immersed in conversation with Draco, he held Hermione to him with a possessive arm.

Skye spoke with amazement. "He can't keep his hands off of her. He only ever touched Fleur if he couldn't avoid it."

Shadow giggled. "He's only now getting to the point where he doesn't jump if one of us touches him."

Sophronia spoke very softly, her expression thoughtful. "Severus has not had a happy life. I never thought I would see him as he is with Hermione. It pleases me more than I can say."

Sirius placed a supportive hand on her shoulder, responsive to the pathos in her voice, and Sophronia gave him a shining look.

Carol said, "I'm so glad you invited us here, this weekend. It has meant more to me than you know to see Severus amongst his family in his own home; it is so much easier to feel that I know something about him, now."

Sophronia reached a hand to Hermione's mother. "I am so glad that you could come, Carol," she said with her gentle warmth. "Hermione has given more of herself to this family than we had any right to expect. For her to fall

in love with Severus and to become a true member of our family just makes things perfect, to us.”

Carol returned the pressure of Sophronia’s hand and each of them had to dry their eyes upon their handkerchiefs.



Severus came up to Hermione as she stood alone on the terrace, looking out into the darkened grounds. “Are you enjoying the party?” he asked, slipping his hands about her waist and nuzzling the back of her neck.

Hermione leant back into his hard body. “I am enjoying every moment of every hour, Severus — even when I’m sleeping.”

He chuckled darkly. “Get plenty of sleep now; I do not intend to allow you to sleep once you belong to me.”

Hermione turned in his arms, pressing herself against him and tilting her head to look into his boundless black eyes, faintly illuminated by the moonlight.

“I wish tonight was our wedding night,” she said wistfully.

Severus raised a long-fingered hand to cup her cheek. “When I take you for my own, Hermione, I do not wish to be obliged to rise from our bed to make conversation with other people for a long, long time. I want day after day of nothing, and no one, but you, until I have learnt every curve of your body by sight, and touch, and taste. I



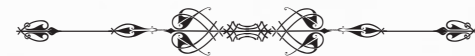
will have no thought nor energy for anyone but my bride.”

“Severus,” she breathed, aroused by the very words he spoke to her.

“Soon,” he promised, turning to take her back into the house.



HERMIONE SAT before the mirror at the dressing table in the bride’s changing room, staring at her own reflection in incredulity. The woman looking back at her seemed like a stranger in all of her wedding finery. At the request of the bridegroom, her hair was down, a profusion of dusky curls framing her face and cascading down her back. Nestled amongst the curls at the top of her head was her wedding wreath, an elegant combination of white silk flowers twining through a tiara studded with crystals and seed pearls. About her throat rested the pearl necklace Severus had presented her with the night before, as a wedding gift.



"It perfectly matches the bracelet Sophronia gave to me!" she had exclaimed, sweeping her hair to one side to permit him to fasten the strand about her throat.

"Does it?" he murmured noncommittally. "How fortunate."

After nearly a month of close daily contact with him, Hermione was becoming quite adept at reading his tones of voice.

Hermione turned to face him. "You bought the bracelet?" she asked. "Why didn't you give it to me?"

He dipped his head and kissed her, his tongue stroking the inside of her mouth with such sensual promise that she trembled in his embrace as he trailed scorching kisses from her lips to her ear. "I could not trust myself to be alone with you and speak with you until I was free to show you my feelings," he murmured. "Yet I longed to see you wear my gift to you, even if you did not know I saw it — and you — as belonging to me."



She flushed, remembering his words. In a very short time, she would be alone with him in their room at the Estuary — the room he had refused to allow her to see when she was there, insisting that it was not yet finished and that it had to be perfect before she would be allowed to see it. Tonight, there would be no interruptions, nothing to stop him from finishing what they had begun, over and over again in the last three weeks...



Sophronia came up to her, leaning down to put her face beside Hermione's as they both looked into the mirror. "You make such a charming bride," she said. "Are you all right?"

Hermione nodded, smiling. "I'm a little nervous, but otherwise, I'm fine."

Sophronia straightened, smoothing her hands over the shoulders of the gown Hermione wore. "The fabric is holding up beautifully to the colour change," she said.

Hermione stood, moving to stand upon the dais in the middle of the floor, and twirled before the bank of mirrors surrounding her from every angle. "It did turn out well, didn't it?" she said, stopping to rub the fabric between her fingers.



It had been Severus' idea. On the last night of her family's visit to the Estuary, she and Severus had been meandering about the grounds, arms about one another, alternately discussing their wedding plans and idly speculating about life after marriage. Pausing beneath a spreading oak tree, Severus held her pinned to the bark with insistent hands at her hips as he tantalised her with his kisses. Raising his face from hers, he murmured, "Do you have a clear idea of the type of wedding robes you prefer?"

"Do you have a suggestion about it?" she had inquired as she surreptitiously untucked his linen shirt from his trousers and had



begun to run her hands up his bare back, adoring the feeling of his skin beneath her fingers.

Cupping her chin in the palm of his hand, he said, "What would you think of the idea of being married in the faerie silk gown, if the colour of the fabric can be altered?"

She had looked up into his face with shining eyes. "That's brilliant!" she had breathed, pulling his head down so she could brush her lips across his. "You're such a romantic, Severus."

His deep chuckle had rippled through her body as fire will lick along a line of gunpowder. "Yes, but a wife cannot be compelled to testify against her husband, so my secret is safe with you."



Carol Granger appeared in the mirror behind her daughter, her smile misty. "I'm so glad we decided to have the dress dyed professionally," she said. "I can scarcely believe that it used to be that dark coral colour before."

Hermione stepped down from the dais and went to put her arms about her mother. "Well, it wasn't dyed, Mum," she said, her voice laced with affection and amusement. "It was charmed a different colour. But I agree with you — Madam Malkin did a much better job of it than I could have done."

The door from the next room opened and the Snape sisters entered, each dressed in their wedding finery. Skye, Shadow, and Stormy would stand with Hermione as her



attendants as she made her vows to their brother. The two older girls were dressed in gowns of the very palest coral satin, carrying bouquets of sweetheart roses tinted to the exact same shade. Stormy's dress was white, with satin ribbons at the hem and the waist in the icy coral tint of her sisters' dresses. She carried a basket of fragrant rose petals of coral and white, charmed with an Ever-Fresh Spell. Each of the girls wore wreaths in their blond hair.

"Hermione!" Stormy squealed, launching herself at her soon-to-be sister. "You're the prettiest bride ever!"

Hermione smiled and gave Stormy a brief hug. "And you're the prettiest flower girl ever," she responded. "And your sisters are the most beautiful bridesmaids I have ever seen." She went forward to touch her cheek briefly to those of the older girls, being careful not to smear their makeup. "You'll be brides before we know it," she murmured to each of them in turn. She added, too softly for Stormy or the mothers to hear, "But Fleur would have been a better bride to go with you, colouring-wise."

Shadow choked back a laugh, but Skye responded quite seriously, placing a comforting hand on Hermione's back. "Oh, no! We blonds would have all appeared quite insipid together. You, on the other hand, with your dark hair and dark eyes, are a lovely contrast to our colouring. You will stand out, just as you should, on your wedding day."



The announcement of Fleur's and Percy's wedding had been published in the DAILY PROPHET one week after the Snape engagement party had been held at the Estuary. The Delacours had apparently been able to manage a fairly elaborate wedding on short notice; Fleur had been married from the Delacour estate, outside Paris, and she and Percy were reported to be honeymooning in Italy. Molly and Arthur had received such short notice that they scarcely had time to pack a bag and grab a Portkey in time to attend the ceremony. Ginny had reported the details of Molly's indignation to Hermione and the Snape girls over ice cream sundaes at Fortescue's during an afternoon of wedding shopping in Diagon Alley.

"Dad wouldn't let Mum tell Percy what she really thought," Ginny confided, "and Mum nearly burst a blood vessel. Dad said that Percy is a grown man and able to make his own decisions, but Mum thought she should try to talk some sense into him. 'Why would any man in his right mind want to marry a woman who has burned through relationships with two other men in less than one year?' she asked him. 'And one of them his own brother!'"

Shadow snorted. "Fleur wanted to get Percy all wrapped up before he could think about it too much."

Skye shook her head. "Bill says that Percy has no clue what kind of person Fleur really is because he hasn't been around her long enough to see her lose her temper."

"Well, he may not have understood a thing she said, but he certainly heard her final words with Severus," Hermione told them, pausing with a spoonful of chocolate ice cream half-way to her lips. "Sirius and Sophronia were down in the kitchen, and they heard everything she said. Percy was just in the next room."

Shadow added, "Ron told me that Percy was probably an easy target because he didn't have a back-up plan. Percy was so sure that Hermione would jump at the chance to marry him, he had no notion of what he would do if she told him 'no.'"

"And I told him 'no' loads of times," Hermione said sourly. "He just wouldn't listen to me." She frowned at her empty sundae dish. "But how did he know about Severus and me? He left the country before our engagement party."

Skye giggled. "I heard Mum say that Sirius was the one who filled Percy in on what was going on between you and Severus. She and Sirius packed Fleur and Percy into a taxi before they left your parents' house that night, and Sirius told them both that you and Severus had left in a limousine and that he would be very surprised if you didn't arrive back at Grimmauld Place 'in a state of disarray and very, very engaged.'"

All the girls giggled at that. Hermione smirked. "That's about right," she said.

A knock fell upon the door and Sophronia went to open

it, careful to shield view of the room with her body.

“Let us in!” Tonks said, and slipped past Sophronia into the room, closely followed by Luna, Pansy, and Ginny.

“Hermione, you look *beautiful*,” Ginny breathed, stopping short just inside the door.

“Thanks, Gin,” the bride answered with a sudden nostalgic twinge. “We used to talk about this a lot, didn’t we?”

Ginny nodded, coming forward to give Hermione a careful hug. Luna watched them with clinical interest. “You talked about Hermione marrying Professor Snape?” she asked.

Pansy snorted so hard that every eye in the room fell upon her. “Sorry,” she muttered, touching a handkerchief to her face. “A wee bit of dust up my nose.”

Tonks rolled her eyes and said, “If Hermione had sat up late nights at the Burrow on the hols planning her wedding to Professor Snape, we would have had her clapped up in St. Mungo’s.”

Hermione smiled widely, turning to hug Tonks. “I didn’t start planning my wedding to Professor Snape until last year around this time — and I wasn’t talking to anyone about it, then.” Pulling away, she surveyed her friend critically. “You’re glowing, Tonks. Have you taken a pregnancy scan?”

Tonks flushed scarlet, protesting, then followed Hermione’s teasing glance to a blushing Sophronia.

“Sophie!” Tonks exclaimed, walking to the older witch

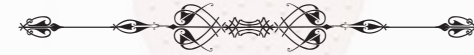
with outstretched hands. “So soon?”

Sophronia nodded, taking Tonks’ hands in her own. “We’re not youngsters, you know,” she said softly. “We want to have a baby or two while it’s still feasible.”

“How far along?” Tonks whispered, for Sophronia’s ear alone.

“About three weeks,” Sophronia answered, speaking softly as well. “Siri says I caught the first time we made love.”

Tonks gurgled a laugh and hugged Sophronia. “Maybe I had better take a scan,” she said.



The day after the engagement party at the Estuary, on a lovely Sunday afternoon, Tonks and Lupin had been married. The Blacks’ new home had not been large enough to hold the engagement ball there, but it was certainly large enough to host a fairly small wedding. The bride and groom stood before Professor Dumbledore, with Sophronia and Sirius serving as the matron of honour and best man. Hermione had persuaded Severus to attend with her, though he had expressed doubt that Lupin would care to have him present at his wedding.

“Lupin all but told me to get stuffed in our last conversation,” he had grumbled.

Hermione studied him through narrowed eyes. “What were you discussing?”

The corner of Severus’ mouth twitched. “I don’t recall.”

Hermione stood up from her place beside him on the loveseat in the main library, tossing her copy of *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY* onto the coffee table. "If you aren't going to be honest with me, I don't see any point in discussing it," she said.

Severus reached up rather lazily and snagged her by the back pocket of her denims, giving a pull which toppled her back into his lap. "I asked him what his intentions were towards you and he told me he'd see me in hell before he'd discuss his relationship with you. Satisfied?"

Lacing her fingers in his hair, she replied, "Not nearly," before kissing him quite thoroughly.

Breaking the kiss, Severus nuzzled across her cheek before growling, "What was it he didn't want to tell me? Did he have you?"

Hermione pulled back from him so she could look into his eyes. "What do you mean, did he have me?"

An ugly glower crossed his face. "It's a simple enough question. I never saw him when he didn't have his filthy paws all over you. Did he have you, Hermione?"

"No, Severus. I never had sex with Remus."

His hand closed on the hair at the nape of her neck. "Who then?"

Hermione struggled, but he held her securely. "Let me go, Severus."

He glared at her for a moment, then released his hold upon her. She shifted out of his lap and moved from the loveseat, sitting down in an armchair to his right.

"Are you sure you want to have this conversation?" she asked

calmly.

Severus gripped the arm of the loveseat tightly and spoke through gritted teeth. "Why would I not wish to have a conversation about your previous sexual partners?"

"Because any question you ask me, I will in turn ask you."

He sneered at her. "Do you think that it is reasonable to compare nineteen years of life with thirty-eight years of life?"

Hermione crossed her arms stubbornly. "Yes."

Severus rose jerkily from the loveseat and began to pace. "That's ludicrous."

She shrugged. "You started it."

He stopped and turned on her. "All right, we'll make it a simple yes or no question," he snarled. "Are you a virgin?"

Hermione shot back, "Are you?"

"No."

She hesitated, balked by his blunt answer. "Define virgin."

"Hermione," he warned stalking to stand over her, his fists clenched by his sides. "Answer me."

"Only if I get to ask the next question."

He placed his hands on the arms of the chair and leaned until his nose was inches from hers. "Tell me."

"I have never had sex before," she told him, infuriated. "So what?"

He stood and turned from her to hide the relief in his expression. "You're acting like a child," he said dismissively.

"You're acting like a jealous git!" she responded, standing and

turning to flounce out of the room.

He was after her, his long strides catching her at the door, which he slammed closed before she could open it properly. He put his other arm on the opposite side of her body, trapping her against the door.

"I have the right to be jealous," he purred, his head bent so that his words stirred the hair next to her ear. "I am to be your husband. I do not like to think of others touching what is mine."

"Do you think I like thinking about the others who have touched what is mine?" she demanded furiously, ramming him with her shoulder and catching him off-guard, so that he staggered back and she was able to escape him. She flung to the other side of the room, agitated. "Why did you have to start this? Who have you made love to, Severus? To people I know? To Fleur?"

He began to approach her cautiously. "No, Hermione. I was never intimate with Fleur."

"I saw you with her at Malfoy Manor, Severus! She was virtually naked — she kissed you and said she woke up and you were gone! What were you doing with a bloody naked Veela in your bed if you were not being intimate with her?"

An enigmatic look crept into his face. "Are you jealous, Hermione? Of me?" Dear Merlin she is jealous! he thought, and a smile of pure pleasure of being thus wanted spread over his face.

"Don't you dare laugh at me!" she cried.

"You're jealous over me," he said, incapable of keeping the satisfaction from his voice. "It never occurred to me that you would

feel that way — about me."

"Of course I am jealous, Severus, and don't try to change the subject! You slept with her! I know you did!"

"No, I did not. What she was doing was trying to preclude all potential rivals by playing on my humanity and my honour — and if the truth be told, you drove her into my bedroom because she was irrationally jealous of you. What I was trying to do was trying to get her out of my bedroom — and to get YOU out of my head. I was successful with the former and happily, a failure in the latter."

Hermione was crying now, tears of rage. She hated to cry when she was angry; she felt that it showed a weakness in her character. When Severus tried to take her in his arms, she repulsed him. "I can't believe you're trying to blame me for what she did!"

"And I can't believe you would hold me responsible for her impropriety," he snapped.

For a moment the only sound was Hermione's angry sobs. SHE glared at him, red-faced and tear-drenched, struggling to regain control. He watched her, warily. At last she spoke again with a modicum of self-command, her teeth gritted. "Well if not her, then who?"

He heaved a sigh. "I will tell you, but only if you come and sit down," he answered reasonably.

Hermione turned her face away from him, staring unseeing out the library window, into the sunny grounds. Severus poured a goblet of water from the carafe on the coffee table and placed it beside the armchair.

"Come," he said gently, sitting down again on the loveseat.

Hermione seated herself in the armchair and accepted the handkerchief he offered her. When she had mopped her face and drunk some of the water, Severus spoke again.

"What would you like to know?"

"When did you last have a relationship?"

One eyebrow rose. "I won't enrage you by asking for a definition of 'relationship,'" he said with some self-mockery. "My encounters have been more in the nature of one-night-stands — you are, perhaps, familiar with the term?"

Hermione nodded. "Do I know any of your partners?"

Severus shook his head. "I seriously doubt it."

"When was the last one?"

"Two years ago, give or take. One night, no complications."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "Do you mean prostitutes?"

"Some of them were. This lady was not."

"Where did you meet her?"

Severus paused. "Hermione, this is embarrassing to me. I am not even sure this is a productive conversation. You do not need to know these details. All you need to know is that though I may have had sex before I have never made love." He moved to take her hand, and she permitted it. "You will be my first, as I will be yours."

"You opened this can of worms, Severus. I was willing to let it rest — I thought you might have shared things with me once we were more comfortable together — but you brought it up, and

now I want to know."

He held her hand, gently stroking it. "There are clubs where one can go in search of company," he said. "I met the lady at a club."

"The Muggles call them 'meat markets,'" Hermione told him, feeling calmed by his gentle touch.

He smiled wryly. "It is an appropriate term," he agreed.

"Did you not wish to see the lady again?"

"No. My position at the school and with the Dark Lord was precarious — I could not afford any sort of entanglement."

"Well, if you did not have to worry about that, would you have wanted to see her again?" she persisted, trying to fathom his reasoning.

"No. It was a one-time thing; we both understood that."

"What was her name?"

"I don't remember."

"Severus!"

"Would you prefer I made one up for you?"

Hermione shook her head wordlessly, trying to imagine what it would be like to be driven to seek out strangers for anonymous coupling to assuage one's loneliness. "Have you not had any relationships?"

"Not since my early twenties," he told her, raising her hand to his lips and pressing a kiss there. "Not until now."

She moved from her chair back into his arms, permitting him to cradle her in his lap. "Why did we fight?"

He laughed softly. "They are called lovers' quarrels. When emotions are running high, rows are easily begun and easily resolved."

She wrapped her arms about his neck and pressed her cheek to his. "There was nothing easy about getting so upset and shouting and crying," she objected. "I don't want to do it again."

"I'll try to keep that in mind," he said with mock solemnity.



Shadow and Skye were the first to walk, with terrific decorum, down the aisle between the rows and rows of those who had come to witness Hermione and Severus' binding. Awaiting them at the end of the aisle was their brother and each of their fiancés, standing stalwartly, in his hour of need, with the man who would one day be their brother. Bill and Ron were stricken with the vision of their women walking toward them in satin and lace, but the groom spared little more than a tiny smile for each of his sisters. His eyes were riveted upon the doorway, through which his bride would come; he did not wish to miss a thing.

Next came Stormy, with her basket of rose petals, carrying herself with an assurance learned at her mother's knee; she walked slowly through the crowd, her hand artfully scattering rose petals in her wake, her eyes demurely cast to watch the petals as they fell from her fingers. When she reached the front of the room, where stood her brother and sisters, she beamed at them with a look of such pride at having successfully accomplished her



first public duty that the girls smiled back at her. Severus, however, appeared entirely spellbound, and soon every eye in the room had turned to watch the bride.

Hermione came into the room full of her friends and the people who had known Severus' family for generations, with her heart swelling to such volume that she felt as if it would burst from her chest. Her mother and father flanked her, each of them tenderly holding to her upper arms. They were dressed in wizarding robes; Carol's were the echo of the bridesmaids' dresses, a slightly darker version of the pastel coral; Mike wore formal black, as was traditional for the father of the bride. As they walked with their daughter, they looked at her face, flushed with a rapt joy that was almost painful to witness.

Hermione pushed aside the fluttering of nervousness at being the cynosure of so many eyes. From across the room, Severus' black eyes were fixated on her and the look upon his face drew her to him as the moth is drawn irrevocably to the flame, heedless of the consequences. The dignified pace which had been maintained so successfully by the Snape girls was beyond the ability of the eager bride. The girl in the faerie silk gown, adorned with a wedding wreath, her feet bare as she trod upon the rose petals laid down for her, did not tarry on the path to her bridegroom.

Severus stood tall, his back straight, his shoulders lev-



el, adorned in the simple white silk shirt and white trousers he had chosen to wear on this day, his feet also bare upon the soft white cloth covering the flagged stones of the wedding hall. He and Hermione had chosen a traditional binding ceremony; the cord which would be used lay upon the great stone table behind Dumbledore, who stood upon the dais behind Severus.

As he looked at Hermione, luminous in her joy, Severus fought to restrain his impulse to crow aloud in exultation that she would presently and unalterably become his before all these witnesses. Even so, his consciousness retained an echo of his inherent melancholy. The moment was frangible; having come this far, he desperately wished to rush to the conclusion of the ritual; there was a thought buried in the substratum of his consciousness screaming to him that it was a dream, that he would awaken, and once again be alone — he did not believe that he could bear for that to be so.

Hermione all but flew to him, moving with such haste through the crowd that the onlookers smiled to see her impatience. Her parents, with a shared smile over her head, acknowledged that she was too nervous to walk in a stately way for the sake of decorum; they permitted her to set the pace without attempting to slow her progress.

When Dumbledore asked the question, the Grangers re-

sponded in one voice that Hermione was given in marriage with the blessing of her family, then they fell back to take seats beside Sophronia and Sirius; Sophronia took Carol's hand and passed to her a fine lawn handkerchief for the tears standing in her eyes, ready to fall.

Dumbledore did not ramble on regarding the institution of marriage, as he was wont to do at weddings. In respect for the dangerous irritability of his Potions master, Dumbledore spoke simply and directly to Severus and Hermione, so that the friends and family of the couple felt as if they had stumbled into a private conversation.

“Hermione, Severus, please join hands and listen to that which I am about to say.

“Above you are the stars, below you are the stones; as time passes, remember: Like a stone, your love should be solid; like a star, your love should be constant. Let the powers of the mind and of the intellect guide you in your marriage; let the strength of your wills bind you together; let the power of love and desire make you happy; and the strength of your dedication make you inseparable. Be close, but not too close. Possess one another, yet be understanding. Have patience with one another, for storms will come, though they will pass again. Be free in giving affection and warmth. Have no fear and let not the ways of the world give you unease, for your love for one another is with you always.”

Dumbledore focussed then on Severus, placing his hands upon the younger man's shoulders as he spoke.

"Severus, I have not the right to bind you to Hermione. Only you have that right. If it be your wish, say so at this time and place your ring in her hand."

Severus glanced at Bill, who placed the surprisingly plain ring in Severus' hand. Dumbledore released Severus, who then placed the flat platinum band, shot around the center with a strip of yellow gold, into Hermione's small hand.

"It is my wish," he said, the conviction in the deeply spoken words carrying clearly to every corner of the room.

Dumbledore said, "Hermione, if it is your wish for Severus to be bound to you, place the ring on his finger."

Devoutly glad that they had practiced this all one rainy afternoon in the back sitting room of the Grangers' home, whilst Mike and Carol looked on with tolerant affection, Hermione slipped the wedding ring Severus had chosen onto the third finger of his left hand.

"Hermione," Dumbledore continued, turning now to take her free hand in his own, "I have not the right to bind you to Severus. Only you have that right. If it be your wish, say so at this time and place your ring in his hand."

Dumbledore released her and Hermione looked over to Skye, who placed the bejewelled gold band in Hermione's hand; she passed it to Severus with a tremulous smile.

"It is my wish," she said, her voice sounding very young and somewhat quavering.

Dumbledore said, "Severus, if it is your wish for Hermione to be bound to you, place the ring on her finger."

Severus looked deeply into Hermione's eyes, his fingers sure as he slipped the band, set with rubies and diamonds, onto her finger. As if they were alone in the great room, he lifted her hand then to his lips and kissed the ring.

"Severus," Dumbledore said, his ancient voice betraying some small degree of the emotion he felt, "please repeat after me."

Severus took both of Hermione's hands, his eyes softening with such tenderness that she scarcely felt able to breathe. She had thought to feel awkward in the presence of all these people, but she was finding it difficult to remember that they were even present.

Severus began to speak, and the rich liquid tones to which Hermione had become accustomed held the onlookers astounded, for they had never heard such tender accents from the fierce-eyed Potions master, and undoubtedly would never do so again. "I, Severus Stephan, in the name of the Spirit that resides within us all, by the life that courses within my blood and the love that resides within my heart, take you, Hermione, to my hand, my heart, and my spirit, to be my chosen one, to desire you

and be desired by you, to possess you, and be possessed by you, without sin or shame, for naught can exist in the purity of my love for you. I promise to love you wholly and completely, without restraint, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in poverty, in life and beyond, where we shall meet, remember, and love again. I shall not seek to change you in any way. I shall respect you, your beliefs, your people, and your ways as I respect myself.”

“Hermione,” Dumbledore said, his voice strengthening again, “please repeat after me.”

Hermione scarcely heard Dumbledore, so enrapt was she in Severus’ fathomless black eyes, but she was fully ready to speak her own vows.

“I, Hermione Jane,” she said, and her voice steadied and became more sure as she gazed into her beloved’s eyes and repeated to him the same vows he had made to her.

Dumbledore picked up the binding cord from the stone table at his back and laid the silken rope over their bound hands, weaving the cord about their wrists and tying it in a knot as he spoke. “With this binding, I tie you, heart to heart, together, as one. With this, know you are joined in sacred union; the knots of this binding are not formed by this cord, but instead by your vows. May your lives ever be joined together in love.

“Severus and Hermione, before this company you have

taken the vows and performed the rites that unite your lives. I therefore pronounce you as husband and wife.” The old man removed the binding cord from their hands and smiled at them, his blue eyes twinkling. “You may kiss one another before these witnesses as testament to your binding.”

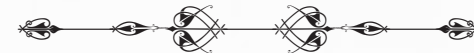
Severus raised his hands and framed Hermione’s face; the two of them stood, now husband and wife, and looked with unmitigated wonder into each other’s faces. At last, he lowered his face and gathered her to him, kissing her tenderly and possessively for all to see. As he released her, he whispered in her ear, “*Mine.*”

Bill and Skye stepped forward then and walked a few feet back down the aisle from Severus and Hermione, where they placed upon the ground an ancient broom.

“Jump the broom!” Dumbledore said, his voice ringing gleefully through the room.

“Jump the broom!” the onlookers said, taking up the chant. “Jump the broom!”

Grinning at one another like children, Severus and Hermione joined hands, took a running start, and leapt over the broom, amidst the cheers and clapping of the English wizarding world.



Neville and Pansy were seated at a table at the Snape/

Granger reception, chatting with Draco and Luna about their honeymoon. Draco had been unable to take Luna away for a wedding trip, due to business matters following the death of his father, but he had promised to take her away the next summer, after she finished at Hogwarts.

"I've heard Professor Snape isn't taking Hermione away," Neville said. "They're just going to go to his country house."

"I think they're more interested in each other than in sightseeing," Luna said, watching the bride and groom as they danced together.

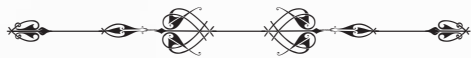
"I saw him smile," Neville said, sounding somewhat alarmed.

Draco and Pansy laughed. "He smiles, silly," Pansy told her husband.

"I never saw him smile before he loved Hermione," Luna said.

"Well, he never smiled except amongst the Slytherins at school," Draco said fairly. "But he smiled plenty when he beat my dad at chess."

"And if he took lots of points from Gryffindor," Neville muttered. "But that was more like a shark baring his teeth at you."



Hermione waltzed with her husband, who could not cease to finger the fabric of the faerie silk dress when he was in her vicinity. She smiled at him, watching his eyes



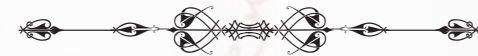
darken with promise as he looked into her face. "I remember how you drew tiny circles on my back with your finger when we danced at the Malfoy Ball," she said.

"Faerie silk gowns should be illegal. They lure the unsuspecting male into impropriety entirely against his better judgement," her spouse responded.

"You weren't improper, Severus."

"I was betrothed to another woman — I ought not to have touched you in that way."

Hermione pressed her lips together, determined not to retort, and Severus pulled her closer to him, until she came to rest with her cheek upon his chest. She considered Fleur for a moment. She had no ill feelings towards the Frenchwoman. Hermione had the man she wanted, and she honestly thought that both Fleur and Percy would be happier together than they would have been with the partners they had first chosen for themselves.



Mr. and Mrs. Percy Weasley had apparently returned to London from their honeymoon, for their pictures had appeared in the DAILY PROPHET in attendance at social functions. Now that Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall had successfully settled the marital plans of each of the Order's young people, headquarters and Phoenix House had been closed up, the furniture shrouded in



Holland covers. Relieved of the necessity, Hermione and Severus had no longer attended the Ministry events, which continued unabated into the autumn days of September. Instead, they had spent their free time in the usual pursuits of betrothed pairs; they made plans for their wedding, they made plans for their removal to Hogwarts after their honeymoon, and they tantalised one another to distraction with their kisses and caresses.

One afternoon they had been packing books in Hermione's bedroom, deciding which ones to send to the Estuary, and which she would need in their quarters at Hogwarts, when Carol had called up to them. "When are you going to open these wedding gifts, Hermione? You'll get behind with your thank-you notes if you don't get busy!"

Hermione had rolled her eyes at Severus. "Mums," she muttered.

He had raised an eyebrow at her. "Be thankful you still have your mum to nag you," he said. "I will finish this packing; you go down and attend to business."

Hermione had run down the stairs and settled on the sofa in the front sitting room, dutifully opening the wedding gifts which had been delivered to the house. Her parents had become quite used to the owls and had even learned to keep a tray of owl treats handy, after a nasty pecking incident. There were four new packages, and Hermione was unwrapping one of them as Severus strolled into the room. She put the pretty silver paper to one side and opened the gift box, bearing the gold foil seal of a gift shop in Diagon Alley.

She lifted out the tissue paper, then put both hands into the box, bringing them out with the square, heavy object within.

Severus froze in the doorway when he saw Hermione with the large, ornate doorknob in her hands. It was encased in a solid, clear material, forever suspended in space. His mind began to mull through what he would say to the inevitable questions to come.

"How bizarre," he said. "Whom must we thank for this... gesture?"

Hermione, with a puzzled frown on her face, placed the object on the coffee table and rummaged about in the box until she emerged with a small white envelope. Opening the gilt-edged parchment, she withdrew a calling card, also edged in gilt, reading Mrs. Percy Ignatius Weasley.

"It's from Fleur and Percy!" she said, mystified.

"Is it?" Severus said, endeavouring to sound surprised. "How quaint."

Turning the card over in her hands, Hermione read aloud the words inscribed there in Fleur's handwriting. "May the communicating door always be open, Percy and Fleur Weasley. I suppose she meant 'door of communication,'" Hermione added thoughtfully, hefting the object again. "I think it is meant to be a paperweight."

Severus seated himself beside her on the couch and withdrew his wand, murmuring a string of spells over the doorknob.

Hermione watched him patiently until he was finished. "What are you looking for?"

Severus gave her a sardonic look. "Curses, of course — what else?"

"Percy wouldn't send us a curse!"

One eyebrow rose. "Would you care to make the same assurances on Fleur's behalf?"

Hermione smiled ruefully before putting the doorknob back in its box and leaning invitingly into his arms. "Fleur is quite bereft, you know," she said as she curled against him, pressing her lips to the pulse in his throat.

Severus enfolded her, closing his eyes and suppressing the groan which would no doubt alarm the Grangers, who were busy watching the telly in the next room. "Bereft how?" he managed.

"She lost you, silly."

Severus tilted Hermione's chin and looked directly into her eyes. "Fleur was to be my partner in a traditional pure-blood arranged marriage, Hermione. She never had me in any sense." He smirked at his beloved's look of extreme self-satisfaction. "Do you particularly like this... ornament?"

Hermione shrugged. "I have the feeling that she is mocking me, in some fashion, but I can't work out how."

Severus had not enlightened her. "I will find a place for it, shall I?"

Hermione had willingly agreed and he had borne the box away with him; she had not seen it again.



Hermione opened her eyes as the dance ended and her gaze fell upon a young man standing at the side of the room,



watching her with a smile on his face. "Look, Severus!" she said, returning the smile. "It's Healer Howser!"

Severus followed her line of sight and a faint sneer touched his face, even as he placed a possessive hand at her waist. "So it is," he agreed, beginning to walk with her toward the Healer.

"I wonder why he has come?"

"I invited him," Severus said.

The couple reached the Healer, who shook their hands and congratulated them with great sincerity, assuring them that he had been sure of their love from the time of Severus' hospital stay. Severus allowed Hermione to conduct the conversation, his black gaze travelling through the crowd. Catching the eye of the orchestra conductor, he nodded once.

"I was surprised to receive the invitation, considering the tone of my last conversation with Professor Snape," Howser commented wryly to Hermione.

Severus returned his attention to his companions. "Never let it be said that Slytherins are poor winners, Howser," Severus said repressively. "A man can afford to be generous on his wedding day." His gaze sought, and found, Varen Vector on the opposite side of the room, in laughing conversation with her teaching colleagues from Hogwarts. Varen looked much better now than she had at the Longbottoms' wedding. She had taken Lucius' death as a sad blow,



but her naturally ebullient spirits were reasserting themselves, now. Varen glanced up and saw Severus; her wave and warm smile brought a quirk to his lip.

“What *was* the tone of your last conversation with Professor Snape, Douglas?” Hermione asked, pressing Severus’ arm to gain his attention.

“The tone was reassuring,” Severus said smoothly, before Healer Howser could answer. “Douglas was concerned, and I assured him that all was well.”

Hermione watched Severus’ face critically. “I’m getting much better at reading him,” she confided to the Healer, “but I still cannot always tell when he’s teasing me.”

Howser smiled, though he wisely did not comment.

Severus noted with satisfaction that Varen was headed in their direction; he quickly moved his eyes to Hermione and Douglas and listened to their light-hearted banter.

“Hermione!” Varen said, joining them. “I’ve never seen Severus so happy — I think he smiled a moment ago and frightened Neville Longbottom. You’ll have to tell me your secret for bewitching an irascible wizard.” Though the playful words were directed to Hermione and Severus, Varen’s speculative eye was on the Healer.

Hermione, noting the direction of Vector’s gaze said, “First of all, you have to keep them alive — and for that you need a Healer of incomparable skill. Varen, this is

Douglas Howser, the Healer who cared for Severus at St. Mungo’s last month.” She smiled over at Douglas adding, “This is Professor Varen Vector, an Arithmancer of incalculable expertise.”

Douglas smiled and took the proffered hand. “You’re ever so much lovelier than the Arithmancy master I had at school.” he said.

A bubble of laughter rose from Varen’s lips. “You mean like old Professor Wrightsum?”

An answering smile touched Howser’s face. I mean *exactly* like old Professor Wrightsum!”

Severus clanced purposefully across the room and caught the eye of the bandmaster as Varen and Douglas began to compare school memories. Soon, the dancers on the floor came to a halt as another song ended; almost immediately, the rock and roll medley began.

Varen wheeled to Hermione with a gleam of anticipation. “May I borrow your husband for this number?”

“I’m sorry Varen,” Severus told her pre-empting Hermione’s answer. “I’m promised to Hermione for this dance.” He took Hermione’s hand, leading her onto the dance floor and leaving the new acquaintances to their own devices; his work there was done. As he twirled Hermione once and she passed smoothly beneath his arm he said, “Where did you come up with that sort of an introduction?”

Hermione gave him a smirk which could have come from his own repertoire. "I, Professor, am a quick study," she said.

Severus did not try to prevent the single "Hah" of laughter which escaped him, and he surreptitiously squeezed her tightly before spinning her from him in the dance.



Some time later, Hermione was standing between her parents, chatting with them and watching at Severus completed the last of his duty dances, gently steering a beaming Stormy about the dance floor. Moments later, after delivering Stormy back to Sophronia and Sirius, Severus joined the Grangers, slipping an arm about his wife.

"It's nearly nine o'clock," he murmured to her.

Carol glanced at him. "Are you leaving?"

Severus nodded. "We'll have one more dance, then she will toss her posy, and we will be gone."

Mike extended his hand, which Severus took in a firm, reassuring grip. "She will come to no harm, Mike. I would give my life to keep her safe."

Hermione kissed her parents good-bye, then she and Severus strolled a few paces away, arm-in-arm.

"Have you enjoyed your wedding day, Mrs. Snape?" Severus asked her, reaching out to lift one of her curls



from her face and to brush it back.

Hermione nodded. "More than I ever thought I would. I had always thought spending so much gold on a party was silly, but it really is an opportunity to mark a turning point, isn't it? Our lives are completely changed, from this day forward."

A twisted smile touched Severus' lips. "I hope you find it to be a change for the better."

The shining look which preceded the gentle kiss to his cheek was enough to make him wish to grab her and Disapparate on the spot.

"How many times a day am I to tell you how much I love you?" she asked him, unaware of the danger in which she stood.

"We'll begin with fifty times a day, I think, and re-evaluate on our fiftieth wedding anniversary," he told her, thinking his words were actually rather closer to the truth than he was willing to admit.

There was a stir in the vicinity of the orchestra, and Hermione turned to see Draco Malfoy stepping up to smile at the assembled wedding guests.

"At the request of the groom, I am asked to reprise a little talk I gave at a fairly recent party. This next song was a special one for the bride and groom, as well as for a few other couples, so let's see if we can continue our run



of good luck in regards to couples coming together for this dance. Now ladies,” Draco continued, “each of you knows a wizard like this. Find the one you would call a *Smooth Operator*, and ask him to dance.”

A ripple of laughter ran through the crowd. The beginning strains of the song began and the witches took that cue to seek out their partners.

Hermione gazed into Severus’ eyes, her heart so full of emotion that she felt her body was not large enough to encompass it all. Without looking away from him, she swept into a full curtsy, as she had done in the Malfoy ballroom. As he had done there, Severus took her hand and constrained her to rise, then took her into his arms and entered into the dance.

“Will history repeat itself?” she murmured to him.

“Not in the least,” he answered, permitting himself to look at her as he had not done when first they danced to this song, his heated gaze resting for an instant upon the extremely low neckline of her gown. “This time, I will do as I only wished to do then. When the song is at an end, I will take you in my arms and whisk you away to a private place, where I may partake of your loveliness in every way you can imagine — as well as in some ways you have not yet learned.”

Hermione was all too aware of the blush that began in her cheeks and travelled to her hairline and down into her

throat — just as she was aware of the man who watched the flush in her skin with half-lidded eyes whilst his fingers, resting correctly upon her waist, circled endlessly over the faerie silk gown.



Douglas Howser was watching the bride and groom on the dance floor, smiling to himself, when he felt a hand upon his arm.

“Won’t you dance with me, Healer?” Varen Vector said, smiling prettily.

“I would be honoured, Professor,” he responded, charmed by the funny, self-deprecating witch.

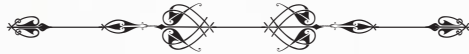


Sophonria did not give any of his former flames a chance to approach Sirius for the ladies’ choice; she claimed him with a wicked gleam in her eye.

“My God, but you’re beautiful,” Sirius told his wife as she melted into his arms. “I should have given you a wedding like this.”

Sophonria placed a finger over his lips. “I’m very happy with the wedding I had, Siri. I’ve never been happier, in all my life.” Leaning up to press her lips to his ear, she reminded him, “We’re going to have a baby.”

He tightened his arms around her. "I love you, Sophie."



Pansy Longbottom took her husband's hand and pulled him onto the dance floor.

"Do you still think you're not smooth?" she asked him as she slid both arms around his neck.

Neville smiled at her in a way which would have shocked his closest friends, so manly and self-assured did he seem. "I must be, love — I convinced you to marry me, didn't I?"

Pansy purred her agreement in his ear.

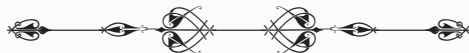


Tonks Lupin leaned over to smile at her husband as they sat at their table on the side of the dance floor. "Dance with me?" she asked.

Remus stood and tugged her insistently to her feet. "You asked me then, too," he said, pulling her against his body.

"Yes, but I wasn't sure that you cared for me, then," she said, tilting her heart-shaped face up to gaze into his eyes.

"I'll keep showing you until there can be no doubt," he promised with a wolfish grin.



All of the assembled guests cheered when Hermione's

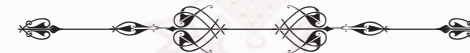


posy floated into the outstretched hands of Varen Vector, who was congratulated by the other unengaged women — and by Douglas Howser, who swiftly sought her out again.

"You did that," Hermione accused her husband.

"Nonsense, woman," Severus replied, taking her by the hand. "Will your accusations never cease?"

The bride and groom obligingly ran the gamut of their well-wishers, being showered in multi-coloured, twinkling confetti before reaching the Disapparition point in the foyer of the wedding hall. Without another glance at their family and friends, Severus wrapped Hermione in his arms, and turning them upon the spot, they were gone.



Severus Apparated with such grace, and he held to Hermione with such firm determination, that she did not even stumble when they arrived at their destination. Hermione immediately saw that she was in an unfamiliar space; she glanced first right, then left, noting the elegant appointments of the large room in which they stood, yet still frowning in confusion. She had expected to arrive in Severus' bedroom at the Estuary.

"Where are we?" she asked, beginning to feel the butterflies fluttering in her abdomen.

"Welcome to our bedroom at the Estuary," he said,



watching her face for her reaction. “This s the master suite.”

Hermione stepped away from him, taking in the spacious apartment, noting the apparently new carpets, draperies and wall coverings; her eyes settled on the enormous four-poster bed, on its dais on the left wall. The duvet and the bed curtains were the colour of flame. The duvet had been folded down and the white sheets were scattered with coral rose petals. Near the foot of the bed, over the fabric of the duvet, the deep coral negligee she had found in his pocket in the limousine was laid out, as if waiting for her to don it. On the opposite side of the bed, black pyjamas and a matching dressing gown awaited Severus.

The sitting area included a low table which held a covered tray, as well as iced wine and glasses.

“Oh, Severus!” she breathed. “It’s perfect.”

He stepped up behind her, one arm pulling her against him whilst the other hand moved her hair to one side, so that her neck was bare to him. “I am happy to hear you say so,” he purred, kissing the back of her neck.

Hermione immediately responded to the touch of his lips upon her flesh, leaning back into his chest, feeling his hands move from her shoulders to stroke down her arms, raising goose bumps over her entire body.

“What about the house-elves?” she asked.

“They will come only if specifically called. We are alone and will have all the privacy we wish,” he promised, allowing her to feel his teeth upon her skin, and thrilling to her soft cry as he did so. “Tonight, Hermione, there will be no stopping me.” He turned her so that she stood facing him, his bride, so very beautiful in his eyes. “I will make you mine.”

Hermione nodded, wide-eyed. “I — I know.” She swallowed. “I’m a little nervous.”

He smiled a genuine smile. “That is because you have been in the middle of a large group of people and you have not adjusted to being alone with me.” He drew her into his arms, bending his head to her. “It is also because I am talking about it, instead of *doing* it.” He kissed her, holding back nothing, invading the sweetness of her mouth with his tongue even as he cradled her head in one hand, and used the other to pull her flush against his body. In seconds, he had wiped her hesitancy from her mind, and she was sucking at his tongue, twining her hands in his hair, pressing herself urgently into him. He placed his large hand flat on the small of her back and allowed himself for the first time to thrust his hips against her much smaller frame, his arousal butting against her stomach in such a way that they groaned with one voice.

“Our night things are laid out, Hermione, but I want to undress you with my own hands — may I do so?”

Instead of answering him, Hermione turned her back to him, lifting her hair out of the way so that he could unfasten the faerie silk gown. Slowly, with hands that trembled slightly, Severus began to unfasten the dress, pressing kisses to her bared flesh as he proceeded down her back, and she stood compliantly under his unaccustomed ministrations. When he had completed the unfastening, he pushed the dress down to her waist, sliding her arms from it, and over her rounded hips, until the fabric puddled at her feet.

“Step out of it,” he murmured, and with reverent hands he picked up the rare fabric and disposed it carefully over the back of an armchair. When he turned back to Hermione, she was facing him in her undergarments and fighting the urge to cover herself. Knowing he had left her too long without his touch, he put his arms around her again, burying his nose in the strawberry-almond fragrance of her curls. “I have dreamt of you, like this,” he whispered before he kissed her again. His hands could not get enough of her skin; he had stroked her back and her stomach beneath her shirts, but now he could clearly see, as well as feel her, and it was swiftly overwhelming his senses.

Here was his prize, which he had dreamt, against his better judgment, of possessing since the night he first held her body and smelt her scent. Now he could kiss her, taste her, touch her, mark her, take her, make her his own,

over and over again. The sooner the better.

He plundered the inside of her mouth with his tongue, his hands having moved to the front clasp of her bra, which he successfully opened. Immediately, his palms cupped her naked breasts and he finished the kiss, sucking her lower lip between his teeth and nipping it lightly as he released her mouth. He moved back and looked down at the uncovered swells, which he had longed to touch and taste for far too long. Without asking her assent, he picked her up bodily and deposited her amidst the fragrant rose petals upon their bed, burying his face in her throat as his hands teased her, soon to be replaced by his lips, and tongue, and teeth, until she was insensate with desire.

“Severus,” she whimpered, striving to move her hips into contact with some part of his anatomy.

With a growl, he grasped the long petticoat and slid the stretching waistband under her bum and down the line of her legs, uncovering the lacy white knickers and her beautifully smooth limbs. As the petticoat travelled down her legs, Hermione’s torso rose from the bed, her unbound breasts bouncing in a way which she would quickly learn could dumbfound her sarcastic, articulate husband to insensibility. She reached for the fabric of the white shirt he wore, tugging at it insistently, if ineffectively.

Abandoning the petticoat at the foot of the bed, he rose

to his knees beside her, his eyes dilating at the vision of the nearly-naked woman struggling to rid him of his clothing.

“What do you want, wife?” he asked her, reaching to caress the peaks of her breasts.

“Undress,” she said, striving for coherence before surrendering her power of intelligible speech again to his hands upon her heated flesh.

Severus watched Hermione as she arched into his touch, begging to be possessed, finally giving himself permission to unleash his desire for her. Relinquishing her for a moment, he sat back on his haunches, stripping the shirt from his chest, then the trousers from his legs, until he was kneeling beside her, entirely unclothed. Her dark eyes, clearly slumberous with desire, drank in the sight of him, and he felt himself swell with further pleasure at the acceptance he read in her face. This wondrous woman did not only respond to his hands and lips and tongue upon her body; she inexplicably desired what she saw when she looked upon *his* body.

He hooked the elastic in the top of her knickers and stripped them from her, allowing them to fall upon the abandoned petticoat as he drank in the sight of his bride upon their wedding bed, naked for him and wanton in her need.

“Severus — please — love me,” she said, reaching her arms to him.

Severus covered her body with his own, gently urging her

to part her legs and to allow him to lie between them as he thrust his tongue into her mouth, both of them now desperate for completion. He kissed down the line of her throat, suckling the tender skin and deliberately marking it, free now to do so, as she moved and whimpered beneath him.

Hermione snarled one hand in his hair and tugged until he looked up into her impassioned face. “Don’t be afraid of hurting me,” she said, deliberately tilting her hips. “We talked about this.”

He moaned as she ground against him.

“Make me yours,” she urged.

And with great tenderness, followed by echoing cries of fulfilment, he did so.



The bath attached to her crimson and gold dressing room was large enough for entertaining, if one were inclined that way. It was fabulously comfortable for lovers who desired nothing so much as a place to drink champagne, nibble on a tray of cold delicacies, and to cleanse themselves of the evidence of one round of lovemaking, in order to indulge in another.

Utterly lost in one another, Hermione and Severus each washed the other in the warm, scented water, inundated with herbs designed to sooth irritated tissue and to relax

muscles strained by unaccustomed activity.

Severus lovingly bathed each cavern and crevasse of Hermione's body, as she had done for him. Then, as she floated by his side in the warmth, he made amends for the inescapable discomfort of her first time by showing her what he could do with his hand between her thighs and his lips upon her breast; she splashed water all over the bathroom floor in her vocal appreciation of his cleverness.

They left the bath and he used one of the crimson towels to dry her thoroughly, rubbing some body parts more attentively than others. When accused of base treachery, he lowered his wife to the plush carpeting in her dressing room and atoned for his perfidy by demonstrating how clever he could be with his mouth, much to the detriment of his scalp, considering how she wound her fingers in his hair in her enthusiasm. When that act was complete, he was overwrought enough to attempt a second, and much more successful, demonstration of how he could move her from within. The entire ordeal required a second bath, after which they subsided into their marital bed and slept, curled into one another's bodies like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle properly united, at last.



Hermione opened her eyes to her first morning as a



married woman and looked over at the sleeping countenance of her husband. In sleep, the lines of care upon his face were all but erased, and she looked at him, seeing in him for the first time the young man he had once been.

"I love you, Severus Snape," she murmured, and watched as he slept on.

Slipping from their bed, she bent to retrieve the negligee from where it had fallen on the carpeted floor, and she went back into the bathroom, where she washed and then sat at her dressing table to make herself beautiful for her husband.

When he paused in the doorway between the bedroom and the dressing room, she was finished with her toilette. The flame-coloured negligee suited her perfectly, he was pleased to note. She had tamed her hair again, so that it fell in charmingly arranged curls past her shoulders. She was holding the mirror of her vanity set in her hands, admiring the delicate monogram, which had been inscribed in rubies, the large "S" in the middle, flanked by the "H" and the "G."

"Only rubies for my Gryffindor lioness," he said, drawing her gaze to him.

Hermione feasted her eyes upon her beloved as he stood in the doorway in his black pyjamas and dressing gown, his black hair freshly washed and brushed straight back from his forehead.

"These rooms and furnishings are beautiful, Severus,"



she said, rising to go to him and to wrap her arms about him. "Did you select all these things yourself?"

"No, Hermione — *you* are beautiful; these are just belongings. I ordered the vanity set for you. I hired a designer to do the room, with some instructions regarding colours and style."

"I haven't even looked all through the room yet — I think one of the doors must be for your bath, and I can't imagine what the last one is."

Severus claimed a very thorough kiss before he gratified her curiosity. "Come, and I will show you what the last one is," he offered. Hermione happily laced her fingers with his, and followed him through the door at the end of the room.

Hermione stopped just inside the room, staring with unconcealed incredulity at the most exquisite miniature library she had ever seen, perfect in every detail. If she had been asked to design the ideal personal library, this room would have been what she would have imagined. There was a skylight built into the ceiling, providing natural lighting. The walls were covered with towering bookcases. The furnishings consisted of a loveseat, a chaise lounge, an enormous armchair, and two desks, pushed together so that the occupants would face one another over their research.

Hermione turned to face Severus. "Did you make this room for us?"

Without speaking, Severus nodded, waiting for her verdict.

"This is Utopia, Severus. If we can induce Nanny to fetch our food here, I don't know why we should ever have to leave."

Moving forward with sudden relief, he jerked her against him and kissed her. "Then it's a good thing Dumbledore has agreed to grant me sabbatical until the spring term," he growled into her hair.

"What?"

Severus lifted her into his arms and settled into the huge armchair with her in his lap. "We don't have to be at Hogwarts until January," he said with great satisfaction.

"Who will take your classes?"

"Dumbledore will. He owes me, believe me."

"Well, good," Hermione said, suddenly vastly interested in the collar of his dressing gown, which she began to trace with one finger. "You can help me search out a good job."

"You know you do not have to work," he said gruffly, looking down at her dark curls.

"But you don't object?" she asked, peeking up at him from beneath her lashes.

"I have told you I do not object," he reminded her, aroused by her coquettish behaviour.

"And you don't mind not having babies right away?"

This time he waited until she looked up to answer her. "I

will allow you to decide when you wish to begin our family," he said, feeling his heart begin to beat faster, knowing that he had never imagined begin able to say those words aloud.

She nodded and lowered her eyes again, fidgeting with his dressing gown collar again. At last, he said, "What kind of work would interest you?"

She assayed another peek at him from beneath her lashes. "I had thought, perhaps, an apprenticeship ..."

Severus snorted. "I do not object to you working, Hermione, but I will not permit you to live away from me. That is out of the question. And I do not know of a master to whom you could apprentice yourself without being required to live on site."

Her lower lip protruded. "*You* said I could be a Potions master's apprentice!"

"I said it, and I meant it."

She looked up again, now full of indignation. "Well, Severus, you're the only Potions master to whom I would ever consider apprenticing myself!"

"I am the only Potions master to whom I would permit you to apprentice yourself," he agreed.

"Well, why can't I be your apprentice?" she demanded hotly.

"Because you have not asked me," he responded patiently.

She sat staring at him. "I've been waiting for you to offer it to me!"

"I would no doubt have been obliged to do so if you had not finally broken down and asked me," he said blandly.

She pulled back her fist and he caught her wrist in his hand. "I think we should be able to make it through at least twenty-four hours of our honeymoon before you are driven to strike me, don't you?"

"Will you have me as your apprentice?" she asked him.

"In every way you can imagine," he agreed with a devilish quirk of his lips, loosening the belt on the robe of her ensemble and looking at her body in the negligee he had bought for her.

Hermione lifted her hand to his face. "I love you, Severus," she said, suddenly overcome with emotion.

He turned his face into her palm, pressing a kiss to her skin. "May I read something to you?" he asked, reaching for the one unshelved book sitting upon the table beside their chair.

Hermione nodded, settling with her cheek against his shoulder.

"I have always loved this poem, because it references potion-making, even if only in the abstract. I thought of it before we ever left the cabin, and, in time, it became our poem, in my mind."

Hermione listened intently as the iambic pentameter rolled off his tongue, the deep, vibrancy of his tones reaching into her very marrow. When he finished, she

said, “You recited a bit of it to me on the night you first kissed me, before you left Grimmauld Place,” she said. “Nor here, nor there, find any refuge from thee.”

He only nodded, moving her hair back from her face, not trusting his voice to speak. In some ways, the sharing of these words was the baring of his most private thoughts.

Suddenly, she shifted in his lap, straddling his thighs with her knees pressed to either side of his hips on the cushion of the seat. “Have you built up your resistance?” she asked, her tongue darting out to lightly trace the contours of his lower lip. “Can you ‘drink unharmed the death of ten?’”

His seeking hand ascertained that she wore no knickers; with a sudden move of his own, he was freed from the confines of his pyjama bottoms and she was guided to engulf him, so that they gasped with one voice, foreheads pressed together.

“I fully mean to drink of your fountain,” he promised her, holding her hips in place as he thrust up, “at every opportunity, and in every way.” He watched in feral appreciation as she grabbed his shoulders, seeking to anchor herself as he thrust again. “And, my God, Hermione, you may be the death of me,” he said, fastening his lips to her throat and suckling there as he continued to move within her, “but if I am destroyed, I am taking you with me.”

Her shouted, “Yes,” may have been the cry of a woman

reaching her violent completion, but as he followed her over that glorious precipice, he chose to hear it as an affirmation — her agreement that their love would not destroy them, but would sustain them — as long as they both should live.





CARAMEL MACCHIATOS for my betas (whether they can pronounce “macchiato” or not), **Keladry Lupin & LariLee**, as well as belated birthday chocolate for **MagicAlly**, who strives to teach me to speak Brit.

Chapter 3

I must crave the pardon of all and sundry as I confess my shame: I have neither the patience nor the desire to write the speech of Fleur Delacour as Jo does, with the French accent. If I tried to do it, I would be spending half my time searching the books to see if she ever said a particular word, and the canon-proper way of representing that word. I will instead write Fleur as if she speaks English like a pro, and ask all of the canon-hounds to forgive me. By all means, do as I do, and supply her with a



French accent in your mind as you read.

I would also like to point out something that I learned by watching the film, *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY*. When using the words “mama” and “papa,” the fabulous British put the accent on the second syllable.

The “Snape bump” has an origin in reality; my beloved Slytherin of a husband has this bump, which both of our children inherited from him.

Chapter 6

One year of Latin, back in 1972, doth not a Latin scholar make. Please forgive me if I have utterly mangled the language; I looked up words for “evil” and “witch/wizard” and put them together to form the title of the book, *Pravus Veneficus*.

Chapter 7

It’s been quite a long time, so allow me to remind you that in Chapter 2, this passage took place:

Snape’s evil genius prompted him to say, “As we were discussing earlier today, Minerva, I understood that Nymphadora Tonks was on her way to betrothed over a month ago.”

If Lupin was aware of Snape’s look of disgust, he gave no sign of it, jotting notes on the parchment before him. “I offered for her,” he said without looking up. “The details haven’t been decided on.”

So, Severus was being *quite* tacky. Don’t you just love him?

Love to my Slytherin of a husband, who explained to me that Severus would **not** threaten to put Val’s testicles in a jar on his desk; rather, he would make his point in an insidious and frightening manner. (What he actually said was, “When you think of what Severus would do, remember *THE GODFATHER* — Severus is like the Don or Michael, not like Sonny.”)

We won’t even go into why men can reference almost **any** situation to *THE GODFATHER*.

Chapter 11

The dropping of the neckline happened to me, by the way. Lo these many years ago, the *first* time hubby and I married, I ordered my wedding gown in a size smaller than I thought I needed — giving in to my mother, don’t ya know — and when it arrived, it was too tight in the bust. So, the seamstress let it out and the neckline dropped a full inch. I really did want to walk around that day with my hand covering my cleavage. And I’m so short, I know everyone in the receiving line got a good look down the front of my dress. Aren’t I mean to give *that* experience to Hermione?

Chapter 14

My adored Slytherin, who allows me to read portions of this story to him for plot holes, asked me more than once why there is not a swifter way for the Death Eaters to communicate with one another. The Floo Network is adminis-

tered by the Ministry for Magic; they would be monitoring it for Death Eater communications. An owl might be a way for them to communicate, but it is possible for owls to be intercepted. It is my theory that sending a messenger by Apparition is the most efficient way for Death Eaters to communicate with Voldemort and with one another. Lucius and Severus, both acting as spies for the Order of the Phoenix, communicate with the coin charm used by Hermione in *The Order of the Phoenix* for disseminating information regarding DA meetings. The Full Body Bind is brought about by the incantation '*Petrificus Totalus*.'

Chapter 15

For those curious about what Merlin's merry widow would look like, check this link:

<http://www.corsets.petticoatdreams.co.uk/overbust%20corsets.htm>

I leave Merlin's petticoats to your individual imaginations.

Hah! I finally worked the word "gobsmacked" into a story! I feel so Brit-savvy, now. Hubby swears that my entire life has been devoted to working up to the place where I could properly use the word "prevaricated" in a story.

"I think it would be quite something to know you in private life," is stolen directly from the lips of Hannibal Lecter in a remark he makes to Clarice Starling in the novel *Silence of the Lambs*, by Thomas Harris. I had to tell y'all that,

because Kabochon and Horserider will call me on it if they read this!

GOOD MORNING, GIRL is the title of both a poem and a song, written for yours truly by her beloved Slytherin, right around this time, 29 years ago.

It might interest you to check back in Chapter 4, when Hermione first enters the study and begins to speak with Snape. He doesn't snap and lose it until she leans over and he catches her scent...

Chapter 18

I took the liberty of moving the dates for ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA from the autumn to the late summer of 1998; I hope the Rickman purists will forgive me.

Chapter 19

"Shadow Lynn" got her middle name from "Subversa Lynn," which is what Mollysister called me when she was reprimanding me for some cliff-hanger or another. She said that since she did not know *my* middle name, she had given me hers. So, now Shadow has your name, doll — I hope you don't mind!

Lots of love to my Slytherin, who poked at me until I got the banter right between Harry and Draco; he also suggested the "A shove is almost as good as an invitation" scenario.

Chapter 20

Minerva gave the little stuffed hippo to Hermione for her to take to Stormy because it had been left behind in Stormy's bed when they first rushed her to St. Mungo's.

The puzzle Professor Snape is playing with in his hidey-hole in Boulogne-sur-Mer is a Rubik's Cube. You may blame SubHub for this.

The indefatigable Keladry Lupin advised me that JKR re-named the spell I knew from Goblet of Fire as "Enervate." It is now properly called "Rennervate" and has been corrected in later editions of the book. Who knew?

Keladry Lupin: Is Healer Howser's first name **Doogie**, by any chance?

Subversa: How did you know?

Chapter 21

Corn flour" in the U.K. is called "corn starch" in the U.S.

Chapter 22

The bit of Shakespeare which Snape read in Hermione's book is Sonnet XXIX. No, it's not the one Alan Rickman recorded for WHEN LOVE SPEAKS, but it is my favourite, and seemed more appropriate to Severus and Hermione.

Fletcher, whom Severus referred to as a Prince Among Pygmy Puffs, was introduced in Chapter 4. The bunny slippers were introduced in the kitchen scene in Chapter 13.

Their introduction to one another is properly private and just between them. For Neville's dilemma regarding Pansy's parents, see the zoo, in chapter 19.

Chapter 23

Though it seems to have gone on and on, please keep in mind that the entire battle occurred over the span of mere minutes.

Though Sophronia, Skye, and Shadow are all witches with wands, the girls have been educated at home as proper young ladies, and have never learnt defensive spells such as are taught in Defence Against the Dark Arts. And Lucius was correct about Sophronia; she hasn't cast a defensive spell since she left Hogwarts and, in her panic, she does not recall one to use.

Kel pointed out that house-elves have powerful magic of their own, which prompts me to explain two things in my narrative. The house-elves at the Delacour home did not use their magic to attack the intruders because they did not have permission to use their magic in that way. That's the way it is, in my universe. The house-elves have to have permission to use their magic in ways outside of their usual duties. Nanny did not grab Stormy and Disapparate back into the house because she was affected by the Anti-Disapparition Jinx which prevented Snape from Disapparating in

the house. House-elves at Hogwarts can Apparate in spite of the restrictions on everyone else, but my theory is that special allowances are made for their movements in the execution of their duties.

I must give thanks on bended knee to my beloved Slytherin, who worked with me tirelessly to plot out the choreography of the battle, drawing graphs and even physically acting things out until I could see it in my own mind. If I did not bring it clearly to your minds, it is I who have failed in my job, not he. We were eating barbecue at Red, Hot, and Blue when we worked out who would cover whom in the battle; we were both moved to tears at the notion of Hermione standing guard over Severus' fallen body.

Chapter 24

Many thanks to my reader Becca, the delightful Inna_Ch, for the phrase, "pull his head out of the cauldron," which I paraphrased for Nanny. Nanny is a strong presence in the Snape household; her influence with Snape is both powerful and positive. The packing that she does for him near the end of this chapter could probably have been done with magic, rather by hand — Nanny chose to do it the slow way to give her more time to work on him.

Chapter 25

To see the two bracelets (because MollysSister is never

satisfied when jewellery is mentioned unless there are pictures), you may use these links.

Fleur's bracelet is here:

http://www.bluenile.com/product_details.asp?oid=2702&ring_size

Hermione's bracelet is here:

http://www.bluenile.com/product_details.asp?oid=6567

As I was determining just what Fleur would say when she saw Hermione wearing the South Sea pearls, and how far she would take it, I was talking it over with my Slytherin, who reminded me of what has become my cardinal rule when writing the Fleur Delacour of *this* story:

What would Miss Piggy do?

Keladry's Note:

- (1) South Sea Pearl bracelet with platinum clasp: 420 Galleons
- (2) Freshwater Pearl bracelet with gold clasp: 10 Galleons
- (3) Pissing off one's shrewish and greedy fiancée, causing her to cause a scene in a public place: priceless

Some things money *can* buy. For everything else, there's Severus Snape.

Chapter 26

No jewellery in this chapter, but you may see the flame-coloured negligee here:

www.victoriassecret.com/commerce/application?namespace=moreInfo&pnbr=XC-188358&moreInfoInd=largeView

Click on "Related Product" to the left of photograph to see the entire ensemble.

Chapter 28 or 29

Check my LJ for links to see the jewels described in these chapters. MollysSister is the world's finest Internet jewellery shopper!

<http://subvers.livejournal.com/>

COLOPHON

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