**The Apothecary's Assistant – or – Witch Austen's Revenge**

by **Subtilior**

**Summary**

One sunny afternoon in June, Unspeakable Granger is called to Hogwarts Library in order to examine a bizarre book. Unfortunately for her, the book is a particularly possessive "Pride and Prejudice;" fortunately for us, Close Encounters of the Regency Kind ensue!

**Notes**

August 2010 – SS/HG Exchange  
Recipient: dozmuffinxc  
Rating: Mature for language, Teen for smooching and innuendo, and S (Swoon-tastic!) for Rampant Impropriety  
Warnings: CRACK!fic  

Original Prompt: Something bookish -- perhaps a spell goes awry and Snape and Hermione are forced to play out the plot of some classic novel?

Author's Note: There have been many sparkling and wonderful "play out the plot of the novel" fics, and even more NON-fic Austen continuations/crossovers/crack!efforts. ("Pride and Prejudice and Zombies" lurches to mind) – and I didn't have time to read them all! So, if I have unknowingly stolen anybody's ideas, my heartfelt apologies.

On the other hand, I stole unashamedly from Austen's "Pride and Prejudice," and to JKR belong Hermione Granger, Severus Snape, and all things Potterish. Though amiable, I am without fortune – so please don't sue me!
In Which There Is an Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single witch in possession of a good novel, must be in want of a life.

Such, of course, was the strongly held opinion of a number of the acquaintance of Miss Hermione Granger (Order of Merlin (1st Class); Acting Hecate of the Arachne Squad; Secretary of the Worldwide Congress of Magiwonks, etc.) So very vocal were they that Miss Granger (having no intention of doing without her novels) had recourse to the heavy sigh, to the contemptuous glance, and, when those and their ilk made no impression on one Ronald Weasley and his, to the most hair-raising exploits that the Department of Mysteries had to offer.

The work was intended to get her acquaintance to Shut Up, If You Please. One drawback was that her work would be unbelievable, even if it were not already Unspeakable; the other was that her willingness to say "Please," and "Thank you," and "Just a bit more time, Ron," was fast evaporating.

"But once you settle down, dear," his mother had said, "and the statutes of limitation run out – well!" Mrs. Weasley had beamed, and pressed Hermione's scarred hand. (A Jub-Jub Bird had coughed too close, the summer previous in Patagonia.) "Just think of the stories you'll have to tell your children!"

That remark went a small way toward explaining why Hermione Granger was standing in front of a wiggling, chortling book, one sunny afternoon in June. Just think of the stories. My work. My life, she thought, grinding her teeth, a story. For someone else.

What went unexplained, later, was what happened next.

The protection spells had been cast, Madam Pince was later to report. All the spells had been in place; the wards as strong as they had ever been. The Dicta-Scroll was recording at a rapid clip. Residual magic in the air made the dust motes dance, and reflected silver and glittering in Hermione's eyes. Her hair had crackled with static.

But then Hermione – "Miss Granger, that is to say," Madam Pince sniffled – had frowned, suddenly, and breathed, "Wait –"

And the book had giggled.

The insatiable public of the wizarding world eagerly awaits the results of the inquest – the answer to a puzzling question, which could very well lead to another universally acknowledged truth. Why did Unspeakable Granger disappear? And what, exactly, was so wanting from a paper-and-ink existence, that a good novel should take possession of a single witch?

For Hermione Granger had indeed vanished, that sunny afternoon in June, and if Hogwarts' battered copy of "Pride and Prejudice" knew whither, or wherefore, it sure as hell wasn't telling.
In Which Hermione Displays both Sense and Sensibility

MM – DOM; Clearance Level: Blue
Field Report; Dicta-Scroll 15610.B2
Uns. Hermione Granger

Item:

Quarto volume, "Pride and Prejudice," 1st ed.(?), author Jane Austen (Muggle) – b. 1775 d. 1816
nb. no distinguishing watermarks, errata do not match Muggle first ed.

Cover of red Moroccan leather unique, as are silver clasps.

Bookplate title page verso. Seal – unicorn rampant, argent, on a field vert; bar sinister;
motto: "C'est vraiment nous qui mal y pensons" – namely: House Malfoy.
Bookplate affixed w/ binding spells; nb. said spells quite potent throughout.

Numerous annotations. Individual sigla and inscriptions prominent on final blank verso, & back cover,
though some near illegible for various reasons.

"Mary!"

Hermione focused on the small print of the book in front of her.

"Mary!"

She felt her right eyelid twitch, for the third time that morning.

"Ma-RY!"

"For heaven's sake, Lydia, lower your voice." A tap at her door, and then a slight dark-eyed girl stepped inside. "Mary dear," in an ironic tone, "your sister wishes to speak to you."

"Yes." Hermione closed the book. "Thank you, sister Elizabeth."

Elizabeth tipped half a smile at her, and left.

Hermione followed. One turn of the narrow hall, one flight of stairs, and she was met by a barrage of ribbons and words, out of which emerged that Lydia had been commissioned to Meryton on an errand, but that Maria Lucas was coming to Longbourn that very morning! and that surely sister Mary could be prevailed upon to –

And thus Hermione found herself outside, with her head wedged into a bonnet and a basket hanging on her arm. She was going to the apothecary, to fetch smelling salts for Mrs. Bennet. She had the first spiking jabs of a headache, and no wand.

She was pretty sure that she had been trapped in "Pride and Prejudice" for three weeks, now.

And it was hell.

When Hermione realized that she had been dropped without a by-your-leave into "Pride and Prejudice," she had called up the memory of the book from the library of her brain and done a quick review of the plot. She had not expected to be known as Mary Bennet, prissy bookworm extraordinaire, but that was that. It was not as though this situation was without precedent; after all, the Department of Mysteries had the exploits of Thursday Next on file. But Next had created a vast scandal by repackaging those events for Muggle readership – so who knew where the truth lay?

"An unreliable narrator," Hermione whispered. She looked up and down the dirty road to Meryton. There was no one in sight, except for a crow or two. "Unreliable narrator!" she shouted.

The crows squawked, and flew away.

Unreliable, to say the least. Hermione let out a shuddering sigh.

It had been three weeks, three weeks, and she was closer to going absolutely potty than she had been in the last ten years.

Hermione scuffed her pattens along the road, and thought further. Facts first. Fact: she didn't have her wand – further fact: she had not seen so much as a glimmer of magic since she had arrived. Fact: she was expected to stay in her room all morning, every morning, plodding away at books like Fordyce's Sermons. Further fact: she was expected to practice the pianoforte. And to like it.

Fact: her hair was lank and greasy. Further fact: apparently Mary Bennet applied a vile-smelling tonic every night before bed, in order to control what must be its natural, indecorous, curl.

Facts: she had no friends, she had no money, she could not travel, and when she tried to speak to Mr. Bennet, he gave her a pointed smile, eyes twinkling, and asked where on earth she wanted to go. "This is most unlike you, dear Mary."

"And that's the problem," Hermione said aloud. Most unlike you. Anything she did out of character ran the risk of upending "Pride and Prejudice."

"But would that be so terrible?" She drummed her fingers on the basket, picturing the horrified readers of Witch Weekly; and the Muggle reading public as a whole, for that matter. Mr. Darcy, and Eliza Bennet, gone forever – or at least ... changed. And who knew what it would do to their progeny, those thousands of novels with a dark-eyed, sardonic hero and a heroine who knew too much?

But every single time she had heard, or read, of this situation, the interloper had slid into said Eliza's lucky slippers, and had seen before her the marvelous prospect of a great estate and of having her brain shagged loose on a regular basis. The former had been a private source of worry in Hermione's own life; the latter (in a more polite form) the source of much discussion amongst the more vocal of her acquaintance, thoughtfully related to her by those most concerned for her well-being.

Hermione watched the path, dirty and full of ruts, and felt tears sting her eyes for at least the third time in that third, horrible week. It was one thing to explain to Ron how he was not leaving her time to think for herself; it was one thing to outline to homebody Harry that she wanted to have more adventures, without having to be the brains of a group all by herself, for once …
It was one thing to have to justify her choices constantly, to friends, and family, and the Wizarding world at large.

It was an entirely different thing to be part of a story, and that story part of a society, that allowed her no choices at all.

Hermione set aside facts for a long, miserable wallow in frustration, punctuated by the occasional sniffle. Her melancholy was not eased by the sight of Meryton; rather, the shabby roofs of merchants' houses and the ill-clad bustle of townspeople sank her spirits further. She knew the apothecary's shop by Mrs. Bennet's description, and spared a moment to look over the hanging herbs, and the cunning mortar and pestle in the window, before going inside.

A bell jangled as she shut the door.

"May I help you, miss?"

Fact: long habits cannot be broken. Hermione's hand flew to where she normally kept a wand, even as her nerves snapped tight at – that – voice ...

_That voice_ ...

Further fact: Severus Snape was staring at her, eyes glittering, from behind the counter.

Hermione prided herself on her command of various situations, both as an Unspeakable, and as a new inhabitant of the unspeakably oppressive world containing Longbourn House, an old pianoforte, and boring walks to Meryton. On her self-command, even.

Final Fact: self-command was all well and good, and facts were facts, however fractious ... but perhaps she still was not used to her stays, or perhaps the surprise proved too much. For regardless of facts – or perhaps indeed because of them – _Isn't he dead?_ – Hermione gave way to feeling, and, with a sense of relief, fainted dead away in Jones' Apothecary Shop.
"Miss Bennet?"
Hermione smelled something sharp, and coughed.
"Miss Mary Bennet –"
Her eyes flew open. "Wha –"
"Ah, there now." A face shimmered into focus; Mr. Jones, the town apothecary. His eyes, anxious, relaxed into a smile. "You rather gave me a fright, Miss Bennet."
"I beg your pardon, Mr. Jones." She sat up, and adjusted her bonnet. "That is –"
"And I'll just add this to the total, shall I?" He decorously helped her to her feet, recorked the bottle of smelling salts, and put it into her basket. Her basket, on the counter, now filled to its brim with pink and clear cut crystal bottles, in a heap of ribbon and lace …

… and there, writing carefully on a piece of paper, stood Snape.

Severus Snape. Hermione stared, trying to process the sight of her erstwhile Potions Professor, looking – healthy? His dark hair was tied back, his face was less gaunt and far more composed than she had ever seen it.

But then he flicked his eyes to hers, and her words dried up in her throat.

Snape glared at her, from behind Mr. Jones' back, and held up a finger to his lips.

Hermione narrowed her own eyes, Occluding automatically. Then she stretched a tentative *Legilimens* towards him – there were some things that almost worked better without a wand, and
thank Merlin that she was a dab hand at most of them –

And then she shivered. Nothing. It was like trying to read a blank slate, grey and smooth –

"Well then," Mr. Jones dusted off his hands. "Your business is always a kindness, Miss Bennet. Do give my regards to your mother."

The basket was placed into her hands. Hermione tightened her grip, cleared her throat. "Yes." Her voice was hoarse. "That is – I thank you, Mr. Jones."

"Not at all." The bell jangled. "If you will excuse me."

Three women pressed into the shop – Hermione recognized Mrs. Long – and obscured her view of the counter. She saw Snape's head disappearing through a doorway. She half-ran to the front door, intending to dart around the shop and catch him at the back –

And then she almost trampled Jane Bennet, the eldest, the sweet and docile Jane. So sweet that she just had to –

"– come after you, dear sister. I am only sorry that I did not accompany you in the first place."

Jane took the basket and urged her outside, like a hen clucking after a particularly recalcitrant chick.

"You study so much, my dear Mary, that your hours of repose should not be broken in on, and I am of a mind to tell Lydia so when we return. Now have you the receipt?"

And then there was only the walk back to Longbourn House, with gentle Jane guarding her every step.

Of their return to Longbourn, and of dinner and the current volume of Fordyce's Sermons on her reading table upstairs, Hermione knew very little. Her thoughts were in a whirl – How is he alive? How is he here? And why? Is there a plot – some conspiracy – or maybe Dumbledore arranged for him to – but how did he live? And how is he here? Her mind continued in this roundabout way until she was called to sit with the rest of the family downstairs. Elizabeth was working a hat with velvet wadding and silk thread; Kitty was coughing, but Hermione did not notice – until –

"What say you, Mary? for you are a young lady of deep reflection I know, and read great books, and make extracts."

Hermione stared at Mr. Bennet. She tried her best to find an answer to – what did he say? – but it seemed he did not care if she did answer, for he raised his white eyebrows, and his eyes twinkled before he looked away.

"While Mary is adjusting her ideas," he continued, "let us return to Mr. Bingley."

"I am sick of Mr. Bingley," cried his wife.

"I am sorry to hear that; but why did you not tell me so before? If I had known as much this morning, I certainly would not have called on him. It is very unlucky; but as I have actually paid the visit, we cannot escape the acquaintance now."

Hermione saw Mrs. Bennet leap from her seat, while Kitty and Lydia squealed. Elizabeth's laugh rang out as her younger sisters began to chatter, and even Jane's eyes glowed.
Her own emotions were less amiable. Fact: she was about fed up with the whole Bennet pack. Further fact: the only good thing about this entire fracas was that finally – finally – the plot was out of the gate. Furthermore: it appeared she was far more concerned for Severus Snape than for Mr. Bingley –

Luckily, Mary Bennet's complexion was not prone to showing blushes. That did not prevent Hermione from stabbing herself with her embroidery needle.

She excused herself from the family circle, found a bit of cotton, and retired to her room, where, after staring at Fordyce's Sermons without seeing it for one last hour, and applying the Vile Tonic to her hair, at least she could try for a good night's sleep.

And so soundly did she sleep, that it took three handfuls of gravel, rattled against her window, to wake her at the stroke of one.

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Her heart pounding, Hermione forced the window open. It squeaked – I'll have to oil that –

"You will oil that later, won't you?" a familiar voice said.

"Shh!" she hissed, squinting into the night. "And of course I'll oil it – that is –"

And she caught a glimpse of a shadow somewhat less obscure than the other shadows in the darkness below.

"… That is …?"

Hermione gritted her teeth. "That is, if such an untoward event as a complete stranger awakening a young lady at night should ever be repeated."

Silence from below. Then she heard faint applause.

"You have the tone down exactly. To say nothing of the vocabulary. Really, Miss Granger –"

"You remember, then? You remember me."

A pause. Then: "Obviously."

"Right." Hermione looked from side to side, and grabbed part of the rose trellis. "Stay where you are – I'm just going to climb out, and –"

"My good Miss Granger," snippily, "have you quite forgotten the power of magic?"

"My good … Professor Snape," she retorted, clenching her jaw again. "I don't –"

"Professor,' nothing." His voice was dry. "It's Mister Snape, here."

"Well, whatever you are. I don't have a wand."

Another pause. Then: "Oh."

"Oh?" She gripped the trellis tighter, and edged onto her windowsill. "You sound – dare I say it – disappointed." Then she swung over, and scrabbled for her footing. "Mister Snape."

"Disappointed,' nothing. I'm thinking."
"Keep quiet, for the love of Merlin!"

"It's not my fault —"

"It damn well is – if you squeal like a stuck pig and wake half the countryside and the house I won't be held responsible, do you hear me?"

The Snape-shaped shadow was fuming from a few paces, and then from one pace away – Hermione smirked.

"Perfectly," she said, aiming for his ear – he jumped in surprise – and she dusted off her hands. "Sir."

"Don't call me 'sir.'"

"Oh." Hermione blinked. "Why not?"

"Because I am your social inferior, Miss Bennet."

"That doesn't mean I can't be polite, does it? And you know it's Granger."

The Snape shadow straightened, somehow indignant even in the dark. "You must maintain your character, Miss Mary Bennet, or the whole book is lost!"

"And what a shame that would be."

"You have not been waiting seven-odd years for the plot to start, have you?"

Hermione was about to retort that at least he had a job … but then the words sank in. She blinked. "Seven … years?"

"By my reckoning, yes." A sniff. "I mixed smelling salts for Mrs. Bennet, when the beautiful Jane Bennet made her dazzling debut at the Happy Pig. Seven years ago."

"The … Happy Pig?"

"That's the name of the Meryton inn."


"And neither is the apothecary's assistant" – the Snapely shadow doffed a shadow hat, and bowed – "yet here I am."

"… Mister Snape. The apothecary's assistant."

"In the flesh."

Hermione's eyes were adjusting to the dark. She bit her lip as those features – familiar from her memory, yet somehow different – emerged from the gloom. "In the flesh … you're alive."

"By my reckoning," and his voice was even more dry, "yes."

"I'm sorry," she said, fighting the urge to curtsey. "It's just that – I mean, I –"

"Spit it out, Granger." A pause; she saw him – grin? "Or actually, don't. You wouldn't believe the
cough-contained contagions in this day and age –"

"I saw you die."

Snape's grin slipped away as his brow furrowed.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Hm." He ran one hand along the brim of his hat, where he held it. "How interesting. And that means –" his voice trailed off.

"Means what?"

"Nothing." Snape's eyes focused on her, from somewhere far away. "It's not important."

Hermione was set to disagree, vehemently, when he flicked out his fingers in a gesture that she remembered – from so many potions classes – and she sucked in a breath despite herself, but he was speaking again, and his voice was the same, too … "What is important is that you are without a wand, and that we do not know why you are here."

"I could say the same of you," she replied, nettled.

"Yes, but you would say wrong." Snape half smiled. "I know very well why I am here, now, and I have no wand because there is none in the book. I could argue Austen knew of no such thing."

"By that logic I could argue that she didn't know about bodily functions – or chamber pots – or boils –"

"Keep your breath to cool your porridge," and his voice was lazy, and he was smirking. "I commend you – though it is a commendation with absolutely no surprise – for doing your homework. If P, then Q; if Q then P does not follow. Point taken. But homework is besides our point, Miss Granger."

Hermione glared at him. "And our point is?"

"You don't follow?" Snape's smirk widened. "Well. Our point – or your point – is the question, namely: we must discover why you are here."

"And why must we do that?"

And he grinned, and the Regency was short on dentists, Hermione remembered with a wince, so at least he fit in. "Because the sooner we discover why, and how, the sooner we shorten "how long" – and the faster you depart "Pride and Prejudice," and the quicker my existence," he finished, "returns to being blessedly Granger-free."

"You know," Hermione said, thoughtfully, "that's a lot of words for saying "bugger off"."

He sucked in a breath. "Language, Miss Granger."

"Oh, that's nothing." She tipped her head. "But we don't have all night to discuss your bad manners or my bad language, so …"

"So …"

Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked. Snape's head jerked to one side; he stared into the
darkness.

Apparently, the dog wasn't enough. There was a distant flash of lightning, and then a rumble of thunder. "I must go."

"So soon?" Hermione did not cover a great yawn; she heard her jaw crack. "Just when our conversation was getting interesting." Lightning flashed again. "And the ambiance slightly Gothic."

"Indeed." He turned back to her, and his eyes flicked from her brow to her feet, only returning to where the wind fluttered her nightgown against her form. "My, how you have grown in seven years, Miss Granger," he drawled. "And grown a sense of humor, too. How fortunate."

"Why fortunate?"

"Why, because you have the visit of your cousin, Mr. Collins, to anticipate with such gentle delight." And Snape's grin was Pure Evil.

"Oh, you sodding bastard --" Hermione growled -- but then her anger gave way to a wave of despair. "Oh, Mr. Collins! Oh, foul man! Oh, I shall run mad!!"

"Oh, very well said," Snape breathed, clapping softly. "Better than Richardson. Better than Udolpho …"

Lightning flashed and thunder crashed. "Oh, dear," Hermione wailed. "I had completely forgotten Mr. Collins!"

"Shhhhh!" Snape pressed a finger to his lips. "Miss Granger, do be quiet! And do consider what Mr. Collins means to me."

"Wh-what?" Hermione snuffled.

Snape smirked, and continued, "I would be remiss if I did not take this moment of emotional vulnerability to pressure you into an illicit correspondence."

"What?!" Hermione raised her head, but only blinked when lightning flashed, closer this time. "You -- wouldn't dare!"

A clap of thunder, and apparently he would, for, "Write to me," Snape whispered, eyes gleaming. "Write to me, Miss Hermione Granger that was -- write more intelligibly than Miss Catherine Morland and more minutely than Mrs. Ann Radcliffe and more -- more -- more! Write me all about Mr. Bingley, and the Lucases, and Mr. Collins and your escapades at the Netherfield Ball --" Hermione gasped, and he snickered, "write me everything, as you see it, and I shall see if we can piece together why you are here."

"Piece --"

"By piece by piece. Like a quilt, only with words, and paper crossed twice, and the dreadful Mr. Collins."

"By Merlin's beard, if I had my wand, here" Hermione growled, "I'd raise Jane Austen from the dead and kick her in the shins for this. Hard."

The heavens opened, and poured down rain. "And I would leap to her defense," Snape said -- and he was laughing, damn him! "I have waited so long for this, Miss Granger, and now it comes to pass! And I will be able to read it as it unfolds … Make your letters interesting, won't you? And
tuck them into the knot of the old oak tree off the first turn to Meryton."

"No – don't leave me without any rational conversation – oh, you're a git, but at least –"

"Shh!" Snape grinned, pressed one finger to his lips again, eyes gleaming in the dark, and – moved his free hand to – press something into … her hand?

Hermione squinted after him as he disappeared into the gloomy night.

Facts first. Fact: Snape was here, and apparently in good health and excellent spirits. Acting slightly out of character … except … Except for the half smile, with no real warmth, and, "I know very well why I am here, now …"

Further fact: She now had a secret correspondence to begin. And Mr. Collins' two – two! – visits to endure. And – she sneezed – the rain was coming down harder.

Hermione snuffled, and then brought her hand to her face, frowning.

One further fact: Snape had left her a handkerchief.

She looked at it, as well as she could in the dark. Then she wrapped it round her fingers, and climbed the trellis again, to fall back into bed and to sleep, perhaps dreaming of a dark mysterious stranger, in a dark and stormy night. This was (she told herself in the morning) a natural reaction to Fordyce's Sermons.
In Which Hermione Rescues Emma

MM – DOM; Clearance Level: Blue

Field Report; Dicta-Scroll 15610.B2

Uns. Hermione Granger

Sigla – Honoria Malfoy, 1861 [Hand 6]

Inscribed – Hepzibah Prinz, my only love – make your home in the ends of the earth and fly to the ending of the world, but wait for me there, for I will ever and only be yours, Lycurgus Malfoy [Hand 7]

Inscribed – To be given to my daughter, on her sixteenth birthday. L. Malfoy, Calicut, 1902 [7]

[nb smoke damage]

Margin – ? [Hand 4]

long story. [Hand 5]

TELL [4]

Prinz … [5]

?? [4]

any relation? [5]

[inkblot; puncture] touché [4]

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Longbourn, near Meryton, Hertfordshire

12 November

Mr. Snape,

I make no apologies for my silence, for you know very well the impropriety of your – I shall not honor it with 'request', but rather call it as it is: 'demand.' I only offer the following in exchange for information valuable to me. In quick summation: we Bennets have been to an assembly at the Happy Pig, and to a party at Lucas Lodge. I played the pianoforte at both engagements; it was only at the latter, however, that I was importuned to play wretched country dances by sister Lydia (very rude) AND had brief words with one Mr. Darcy (somehow even more rude. But this will not surprise you.)

Mr. Darcy has a lean and hungry look. He watches sister Elizabeth with all the emergent greed of a clothier first touching velvet.

Sister Jane travels to Netherfield this morning, to spend the day with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst. I will put this letter into the knot of the old oak tree you specified – before it begins to rain. (You know very well that it will, and why.)
In return for this account, I ask: you have been here seven years, and yet have seen no magic performed? How is it possible that you have done none yourself? for I remember you being quite set against 'foolish wand-waving' in your indescribably tedious classes, long suffered by

H. Granger

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Meryton, Hertfordshire

13 November

Miss Mary Bennet,

I read your letter of yesterday with pleasure – a pleasure only perhaps surpassed by my own figuring in the plot of this, our great existence, on this very afternoon. I have just corked some draughts for your eldest sister, at present languishing at Netherfield. Consume yourself with envy. Mr. Jones bears my draughts to the famed Miss Bennet, along with a length of flannel for her swan-like throat. With any luck, he will refrain from smearing grease on it this time.

Mr. Darcy thinks too much – such men are dangerous. Be grateful that he only barely touches that Elizabethan velvet in that fevered imagination of yours … to tip it on such short acquaintance would surely offend your keen sense of propriety. Would it not?

Speaking of offended propriety, I was at first taken aback by your disrespect for a former teacher – but then I remembered that I cared nothing for your opinion, and was comforted. I do indeed brew potions here. However, I find the potency of my magic limited to a species of household miscellany: various basic tinctures and tisanes, some cleaning mixtures, and the occasional love potion. I have experimented over the years, though with caution, since Jones the apothecary is difficult to rob. (Not that he keeps efficient locks; rather, he is as parsimonious as he is obsessive, and recounts his stock almost every day.)

You may imagine how discomposed I was, when I first concluded that it is impossible to brew anything, here, past the level of a second year, or a dull Third. But time – and time here, in this novel – has a way of reconciling one to the unthinkable.

I could have sought more exotic ingredients in London, if indeed they do exist here, but I found myself reluctant to leave Longbourn. I know that London itself exists, within the bounds of this, our own existence in these pages … but I will be truthful: I would not wish to miss the laying of a foundation stone of the plot of "Pride and Prejudice", however small. For example: witnessing Miss Bennet’s debut at the Happy Pig gave me great pleasure, almost as much as envisioning your countenance upon first beholding Mr. Collins, which leads me to sign myself,

Your devoted and eagerly anticipatory reader,

S. Snape

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Longbourn, near Meryton, Hertfordshire

18 November

Mr. Snape,
He is come. He is worse than expected. And let me take this moment, sir, to request (with utmost respect) that you burn in hell.

H. Granger

GRANGER, you stupid sod, or can't you spell it? Wanker.

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Meryton, Hertfordshire

19 November

My dear Miss Granger,

Your letter of yesterday, elegant in its terseness, filled me with indescribable delight. But before my cup of sensibility runneth over, permit me to offer you my utmost sympathies in the matter of Mr. Collins. The insufferable are always made worse when one is required to treat them with politeness, or at least to refrain from hexing them. Take your frustration and ill-will, multiply it by some dozen years, and you will have a sensation of what I felt during my teaching career. Fleeing it forever, from the ill-fated tower, formed one of the greatest reliefs of my life.

If Mr. Collins has come, Mr. Wickham cannot be far behind. Pray write, and tell me of him. I believe that he will resemble one Sirius Black, in all of his weakness and vanity – but without the ability that Black (rest in peace) at least possessed – tho' that same ability was only the shadow of the same belonging to

S. Snape

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Longbourn, near Meryton, Hertfordshire

24 November

Mr. Snape,

It has rained since Friday, which is the only reason I write to you now. Boredom has driven me to it. Boredom, and curiosity – you write that you fled the Astronomy tower (and I remember you bowling me over in your office) … why, then, are you so modest about your return to Hogwarts, and your illustrious (if somewhat short) career as Headmaster?

The Netherfield Ball takes place this Tuesday, after which I will lie low while Mr. Collins (nb still insufferable) proposes to sister Lizzy. I am more affected by the thought of Charlotte marrying him than I thought I would be – she has been kind to Mary Bennet, and I'm sure she would be kind to me (Hermione) if I could speak to her as myself.

HG

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Meryton, Hertfordshire

26 November

My dear Miss Granger,
The less said about my career as Headmaster, the better.

I do hope that you give a dazzling performance at Netherfield this evening. Send me word of your crotchets and conquests, and if you need a humorous distraction, picture the kind Charlotte faced with her wedding night.

Yours sincerely,

Severus Snape

Hermione ran up the staircase of Netherfield Hall, trying desperately not to burst into tears. She dashed an angry hand over her eyes and flung open the first door she found. It was a small anteroom to the library, with a sofa and a writing desk – comfortable enough, if dark. Nothing, however, could be dark enough to match her mood.

"Bloody, bloody hell –"

It had been horrible.

Snape's note had lodged in her memory like a viper – she had not danced, but had sung badly, and played horribly on the pianoforte – but I was supposed to – and Mr. Bennet had raised both white eyebrows, and his eyes had twinkled as he had pitched his voice to carry, "That will do extremely well, child. You have delighted us long enough. Let the other young ladies have time to exhibit."

"Bastard!" Hermione snarled. She turned wildly in place, looking for something to hit.

Breakables, breakables, too fragile, too large - oh, perhaps that indifferent imitation of china on the carved mantelpiece, or perhaps that white pillow - oh ...

A gorgeous and immaculate Persian cat stared at her, from a cushion on the sofa.

Hermione blinked, but then gritted her teeth, chose another pillow, and punched it. The cat blinked back, watching from its safe sconce as the cushion – embroidered very badly – whisked over the marble floor, only to end up at the feet of –

Hermione stared, her mouth falling open. Caroline Bingley stared back at her, a sneer curling her lips.

"Such language, Miss Mary Bennet. I am surprised at you."

"I –" She tried for words, and found none. Oh, shit – this isn't in the book. Shit shit shit – what do I do now?!

Miss Bingley's eyes gleamed in the room's darkness. "But I am no more surprised than you will be, when you realize that your conceited sister's attempts to ensnare Mr. Darcy will fail. And do you know why?"

Before Hermione could answer, the other woman opened her silver-and-scarlet reticule. "This is why, Miss Bennet."

And Hermione gasped, despite herself, as Miss Bingley took out a crystal ball – which drew up the milky light of the moon from the marble floor, reflecting and refracting it into the unmistakable glow of magic.

"Elizabeth will fail," Miss Bingley purred, "because I am an enchantress, and I say that my magic
is more powerful than any will ever know!"

"Magic …" Hermione whispered.

"Oh!" A laugh. "Dear me, I forget myself. Those without a proper education – and the proper
connexions – cannot be permitted to witness magic! like so –"

She raised the crystal ball, and light spilled onto the cat. Hermione's hair stood on end as she heard
the Persian chirp in protest, then yowl in pain – and the yowl turned into a feline shriek as what
had to be a transfiguration started to go horribly wrong – she didn't have to take a N.E.W.T. to
realize that what Miss Bingley was doing was –

"Cruel!" Hermione gasped, "Oh – stop! You have no idea what you're doing!!"

"Oh, la." Miss Bingley shrugged, flicking her eyes away from the incomplete transfiguration
curling in on itself. "Such cats are only two pounds in London, Miss Mary. My sister Hurst has a
repulsive habit of feeding Emma – or Emma that was," she looked thoughtfully at the thing that
had been a cat, now rolling back and forth in pain on the sopha, crying, "as I say, feeding a cat
from the breakfast table, and such behavior cannot be borne."

Hermione did not stop to think. Instead, she strode up to the other woman, and yanked the crystal
from her long white hands.

Miss Bingley turned puce. "Miss Mary, what do you think –"

"What do I think?" Hermione hissed, pulse banging in her ears. "I think that I shall keep this
crystal, that you are going to forget what you did – and that you are an incompetent bitch. Finite
incantatem!"

A moonlit flash enveloped the thing-that-was-a-cat in a silvery glow – and the horrible crying
stopped.

"What –" Miss Bingley sputtered.

Instinct made Hermione raise the orb high. She looked the other straight in the eye, and spat,
"Obliviate."

Another moonlit flash –

– and then there was Miss Bingley, blinking at her.

Hermione clenched her hands around the crystal ball, to stop them from shaking. "Surely you had
best return to your guests, Miss Bingley."


She gritted her teeth. "Your guests are in the ballroom."

"Yes," Miss Bingley murmured. "Of course ..." She took her gown in her hands, and stepped out
of the room. The door closed with a snick behind her.

"Oh –" Hermione ran to the sopha with a sob. "Oh, are you all right?"

She buried her hands in the cat's silky white fur, then started petting it in earnest when she felt it
gasp and shudder. "Poor kitty, poor thing ... How could anyone –" Memories of Crookshanks,
now alone in a London flat for who knew how long, flashed through her mind – although surely
Ron would care for him – but – but –

The Persian looked up at her, with a silent miaow. Its eyes were very green, and it wore a silver collar. Hermione kept petting it – and then shakily, rustily, it began to purr.

She let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "Oh, cat – Emma, isn't it?" The cat nuded its face into her hand. "Emma. Come sit by me."

And Hermione scooped the cat onto her lap, and collapsed into the chair of the corner writing desk. She only barely had enough time to dash off a note to Snape, briefly mentioning the ball, Wickham's absence, her own performance, and her rescuing of Emma – before a footman came to the door to inform her, gravely, that her family was preparing to leave.

On another evening, she would have said that luck was with her. However, so much about the night of the Netherfield ball had been unlucky for all concerned, that Hermione only took a moment to realize that power was at work, instead … The power to render the cat invisible in her arms as she took it with her, and the power to give her note wings and send it flying to Snape … that power came from the crystal, which she safely stowed in her cloak pocket.

She put it on her reading desk when she retired that evening. The orb glowed in the moonlight at her, serene as glass from across the room. It was not a large thing – not as wide across as the palm of her hand.

Much smaller, in fact, than the rock that came smashing through her window five minutes after she had fallen asleep.

**************************
In Which Appears Not Mansfield, but Rosings Park (Part the First)

MM – DOM; Clearance Level: Blue
Field Report; Dicta-Scroll 15610.B2
Uns. Hermione Granger

Sigla – Perpetua Prinz-Malfoy, 1917 [Hand 8]

23 Dec. 1938 Abraxes Malfoy [Hand 9]

Lucius Malfoy [Hand 5]
Margin – who will make of this hash a mincemeat [Hand 4]
bugger off [5]
[illegible]
we'll get in trouble [5]
like thats ever bothered you [4]
I need this project to graduate, you halfblood vole [5]

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Unspeakable Granger woke up with a gasp, leaped across the room and grabbed at her desk, and had cast Muffliato and Reparo before she even remembered that it wasn't a wand that was doing it, it was a crystal ball –

But that same crystal appeared to work quite well. Hermione blinked at it, owlishly, then hoisted the protesting cat onto one hip, and transported them both to Snape (standing outside, and fuming) before she could rethink the notion.

"Really, if you must persist in throwing things, Mister Snape, why not go in for cricket?"

"Because that's for sodding toffs, Miss Mary Bennet – and speaking of which –"

His voice was everything it had ever been in class – and he was so infuriated that he didn't seem to notice the orb in her hand. All Snape needed was an object, it seemed, upon which to vent his anger, visible in clenched jaw and glittering eyes.

Hermione hid the crystal behind her back, took a firm hold of Emma, and braced herself.

"Why didn't you tell me this happened?!!"

"I –"

"Emma?! Emma?! What could be next, for the love of Merlin?!!"

"I –"

"It's not enough that I bloody well break up a duel between Colonel Brandon and Mr. Willoughby in Meryton Green not two hours ago – in the dark of night, I might add! – but I have to deal with Mrs. Norris and her precious Maria moving in next to the Happy Pig, and Mr. William Walter Eliot drive straight through town with the Eliot arms large as bloody life on his bloody carriage door, and now –"

"Language, Mr. Snape!"
Snape looked ready to explode. "Language?! You speak to me of language, when you neglect to inform me that Miss Emma Woodhouse has left her native novel and shown up almost five years early in this one?"

"Emma Woodhouse? …"

Several things fell into place, in Hermione's mind, but then Snape took a step closer – and the Unspeakable in her felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end at the look in his eyes, glittering in the dark. "Anything out of the ordinary, Miss Granger," he whispered, "anything not part of the plot of "Pride and Prejudice" – anything at all and you tell me in person, and not by letter. Is that quite clear?"

Unspeakable Granger straightened her shoulders. Fact: Snape greatly resembled what he had been in her world, face twisted in anger, dark eyes snapping in anger, everything about him knotted up in anger –

Further fact: she no longer found his temper tantrums intimidating in the least.

Hermione smiled at him, dangerously. "What is clear, Mr. Snape, is that seven years in this existence have improved your manners as little as they have your intelligence."

He drew himself up, and spat: "What."

"'What?' he says?" She brandished the cat at him. "This is "what," Mister Snape. And as talented as she may be in other respects, this Emma is not quite up to mistaking and misunderstanding her way through the most intricate of Austen plots. Wouldn't you agree?"

Emma meowed.

Snape blinked.

Hermione thought, happily, that he had never looked so befuddled. She decided that it suited him.

"That's a cat."

"Oh, well spotted."

"A cat – a cat – but –" He ran a hand across his mouth. "But – how did you smuggle what looks to be a purebred Persian out of Netherfield without a hue and cry – and how –" Snape's eyes widened, "How did you get down here so quickly, for that matter?"

Hermione smirked, then gave him Emma. "Hold her."

"Only if you tell me exactly what – oh."

She drew the glowing crystal out from behind her back.

"Oh …"

And Hermione blinked. If anything, Snape's voice sounded – well, it sounded like the incoherent noise she made when faced with a double layer box of Leonidas, awarded for a job well done (most recently, an Unspeakable recon at the Taj Mahal.) That throaty murmur of desire. If he were a cat, he'd be purring.

She blinked again. The cat was purring – arching herself along one of Snape's strong, fine-boned hands. His fingers appeared to move without his knowing, sinking into Emma's soft white fur …
Fact: a plush, white Persian cat induced to ecstasy against a black coat made a striking picture. Further fact: Hermione's mouth was suddenly watering.

She refused to consider why; instead, she shoved the crystal closer and watched Snape squint in the sudden light. He looked thick instead of thrilling. The look did not suit him as well as before, but: *Good*, she thought, grumpily.

"What is this, Mr. Snape?"

"Why Miss Granger, it's a magic crystal – used for day-to-day spellcasting by witches for hundreds of years. You see …" and he stretched out one long finger, touching the crystal gently, "a wand, both powerful and portable, was usually gendered masculine, and a crystal feminine, for reasons you can surely guess. And since the orb was relegated increasingly to household spells and to waffle like divination, as wand ingredients became increasingly common … that same orb fell out of favor in the last hundred years or so."

Hermione sniffed. "But Wendelyn the Weird had a wand, and Great Gurtha, to say nothing of Nimuë and Morgan le Fay –"

Snape's eyes had closed completely; a smile tugged at his mouth. "And Merlin, deep in the diamond of the day, had a magic crystal – but nobody seems to mention it in the history books."

"Then how –"

"I only say that wand and orb were usually opposed, Granger, not that there was a good reason for it. And it surely stands to reason that the latter could be just as powerful as the former – and speaking of power, could you please dial it down a notch?" One eyebrow arched over a still-closed eye. "I can't see."

Hermione willed the orb to glow less brightly – its white light subsided into a glimmer, and she felt a rush of – *something* – too intense to name, to realize that there –*there* – was her magic, and it was here *in the book with her* –

"There. Now I see." Snape eyed the orb, considering. "I believe it possible that Austen herself saw an orb like this, being used, at some point. That is why it can exist in her reality. If magic formed no part of her life, we would truly be in trouble, wouldn't we?"

"I don't see how we're in less trouble than we were before. You said that *Willoughby* showed up? In *Pride and Prejudice*?!"

A sigh. "Yes, well, he's rather a cousin to Mr. Wickham, it seems. No, Miss Granger – what I mean is that the disconcerting rash of visitations from other novels – all of which happened within a two-hour span this evening – is perhaps balanced by the fact that *one* of us can cast spells again."

She felt giddy. "Perhaps."

Snape cast her a look somehow both wary and smug. "And thus you will be all the more frustrated when I tell you that *I* need to investigate, and *you* need to stay here and keep an eye on the plot."

Speechless for a split second, Hermione rapidly recovered her vocabulary, and deployed some of its choicest phrases.

"… Language, Miss Granger."
"Why?!” she snarled. "Snape, I'm going out of my fucking mind here in Longbourn – Mr. Collins and Fordyce's Sermons in alternation will do that to a person. I need to leave!"

"You need to play the role of Mary Bennet," he said, "who remains in her room for half the day."

"Exactly!!!"

"And during that half of the day, you shall scout for me in that crystal, and keep me informed of plot developments – by pigeon, perhaps."

"I can be of more bloody help than a pigeon!"

"Hermione ..."

It was something in the quality of his voice – some resonance – that caught her attention. Snape stroked the cat, and looked serious. "If we were both spies, I would say that you have by far the better placement, strategically –” he bowed – "not just socially."

Hermione choked back a lump in her throat. "You're saying that I need to stay at home and mind the sewing, while you go out and do things."

Snape bared his teeth. "No. I'm saying that you need to stay in Meryton, and that you need to keep Lydia from getting knocked up by the boot boy, to ensure Mr. Collins makes his two proposals in the correct order, and to use that crystal in order to banish any non-native characters to Timbuktu. I will be the one freezing my arse off as I try to track down who is behind all this."

She held his gaze, measuring. "You haven't seen me for seven years, Snape. You have no idea what I've done, or what I've become."

"But you know what I've done, Granger, and what I can do. And you know that I have moved through this society," Snape's free hand, the one not supporting Emma, descried a circle in the air, "with its particular rules and customs, for the past seven years. Now tell me truly: who is better qualified to ferret out information at a great estate – than myself?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "A great estate?"

"Let's just say I have my suspicions about who is doing this. And why. And where." Snape petted the cat, then looked up at her, sly.

She considered for one more minute, then sighed. "At least give Emma back to me."

"Very well." Her former Potions professor detached the cat, claw by claw, from his coat, and handed her over. "Quite a lovely creature."

"Yes, but she's shed all over you." Hermione closed the distance between them, and began to brush the white fur from black broadcloth, matter-of-fact.

It took her a moment to realize that Snape was holding his breath.

Unspeakable Granger looked up into his eyes – pitch black, gleaming down at her with a look of –

What she saw there made her blink. Then she spread her palm above his heart, and Severus Snape jerked back, as if burned.

"Yes – very well. Very well: I shall inform you of any progress, and you shall banish the
interlopers to – to –"

"Timbuktu," Hermione said, softly.

"Yes – yes, Timbuktu, which is to say –" Snape's eyes were darting everywhere, except at her, and he almost tripped as he backed away, step by step, "that is: farewell."

And she watched as he turned and ran, vanishing into the darkness.

Unspeakable Granger transported herself back to bed, and lay awake for quite some time. This was normal (she told herself repeatedly) – quite normal, considering the chill of the night air - and despite the fact that due to its discovered affection for her hair tonic, a Persian cat made a toque both elegant and effective.

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Severus did not keep his promise – although (Hermione thought, alternately amused and resigned, from time to time) he had never promised outright. Regardless, the promised or (at the very least) implied pigeon put in no appearance, as November turned to December. It was for the best, really, because she had made observations of Mr. Collins unfit for print or script.

Sheer contrariness made her keep Snape out of the visions in her crystal ball – but she practiced Apparating longer distances, Obliviated Lydia no fewer than six times, and successfully waylaid the carriage of Morland and Thorpe outside Meryton. (Hermione was particularly proud of her disguise: an Agent of the Crown, inspecting the toll road and impervious to liquid bribery.) Then the Gardiners arrived for the Christmas season, plunging the Bennet family into a whirl of festivity.

Through all of these comings and goings, though, curiosity gnawed at her, and Hermione began to reconsider the crystal embargo.

But then, on Christmas Eve, a fat pigeon flew in to the glass of her window, promising Plot Development, and she was comforted.

*******************************

The pigeon proved unaffected by its crash, goggling at her with amber eyes, whilst Emma watched from a cushion and Hermione read the message.

*Oak tree – New yrs eve – midnight. Dress warmly.*

"Really," Hermione said, giving the pigeon a candied almond. "There is such a thing as taking surly mystery a trifle too far."

She reconsidered, though, as the pigeon wobbled off her balcony, carrying her reply. With the exception of the hilarity of Mr. Collins' proposal – and its results – nothing had passed at Longbourn except Jane mooning over the absent Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth cutting her teeth on the insufferable Mr. Wickham, Kitty and Lydia pulling pranks and Mrs. Bennet whinging about the weather. And a Gardiner had spilled cocoa on *Fordyce's Sermons* that very morning (which, ordinarily, she would not have minded – but it was the *principle* of the thing.) Mr. Bennet had proffered a handkerchief and a pointed smile, which Hermione longed to hex right off his face.

So any mystery – surly or sunny – would vary the doldrums of Narrative Filler.

It took some ingenuity to escape a New Years' Eve fete at Lucas Lodge, but Mary Bennet pleaded a sick headache, and retired to her room at eight o'clock.
Her mother would have had a fainting fit, had she seen her middle daughter vanish in a glow of magic at five minutes to midnight. But then, Hermione reflected, since this was the closest to a tryst Mary Bennet would ever get, perhaps Mrs. Bennet would have made peace with it more quickly than expected.

"Right," Snape said, not looking up from a large piece of unfolded paper. "Rosings Park – what do you know of it?"

"Hello to you too," Hermione grumped. "Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, et cetera. And as for Rosings Park, why don't you ask Mr. Collins?"

"Because I would curdle him with belladonna before three words escaped his mouth. And because we're going to break into it."

"What, Rosings?!

"The same."

Hermione thought a moment. "You're right. Mr. Collins would weep, and undoubtedly liken it to the siege of Ilium, in several dramatic monologues."

"As I said: belladonna."

While ordinarily she would happily concur in poisoning Mr. Collins, this time, Hermione stepped closer to Snape, shivering in the cold. He frowned.

"I did tell you to dress warmly."

"Well, yes, but I hadn't expected it to be this cold … Quite unseasonable."

"Unseasonable or unreasonable, you are capable of a warming charm, are you not?"

She flushed. "Of course." One quick spell later and she was warm; Snape darted a look at her, and edged closer. "Ha. Shoe's on the other foot?"

"My shoes are quite sufficient to the weather, Miss Granger."

"Then let's say 'turnabout is fair play.' And call me Hermione."

His eyes flashed black, as he looked up from the map. "I beg your pardon?"

Hermione heaved a sigh. "We're about to break into Rosings Park – the Rosings Park – and commit several crimes in the process surely punishable by hanging – or by transport to Australia. Do you think we could move to a first-name basis?"

"Miss Granger," he said, matter-of-fact, "I would rather be transported than hear my first name on your lips."

He held the paper closer, studying it. Hermione pressed her own lips together to keep from snapping a sharp retort. Fact: Snape was a bastard; further fact: he was undoubtedly lashing out to keep her at a distance. Quite predictable, really.

That didn't make it sting any less.
"There." He folded the map and tucked it away in his coat. "Follow me."

She followed, shoes crunching on the withered grass. It was only when she grumpily compared Snape's boorish behavior to that of Harry and Ron, during the camping trip from hell, that she realized — with a start —

— oh — I haven't thought of them in —

In weeks.

Hermione held the orb closer, and steeled her mind and will to the task ahead. The perpetrator must be found, and must undo whatever magic had been wrought. She must return to her own time, and place — and soon, lest she forget further.

"With any luck," she said to herself, "the bastard will be tap-dancing down the front steps and wearing nothing but crinoline."

"Crinoline was a Victorian invention," Snape called back to her; she cursed, and walked on.

Luck did not present them with a scantily clad Victorian dancer of villainous aspect and dubious birth. But thanks to Snape's skill at sneaking, and to some quick spellwork on her own part, they were able to dodge the pack of hounds standing guard, the two footmen snoring outside the ballroom, and a passel of housemaids darting up and down the back stairs.

But their luck ran out when they heard footsteps coming down the hall towards them, with no retreat possible —

"Shit," Hermione said. "Quick —" and she cast a quick transfiguration —

— and promptly choked back a hysterical laugh.

"What have you done?!" Snape hissed. "Reverse this spell immediately, or I'll —"

"Sorry," she gurgled, "but it grabs the nearest image residue that's a good fit, and decks you out appropriately, so you can impersonate —"

The footsteps drew closer, rounded a corner, and then, "My lady!" a chambermaid gasped.

Hermione busied herself with picking up the train of Snape's long, lace-trimmed evening dress.

"Yes?" Snape's voice was perfectly snobbish, and his beak of a nose was matched only by his gimlet eyes, peering out from beneath a mammoth, ostrich-feathered hat. "Why do you neglect your post, may I ask?"

"Begging my lady's pardon!" the chambermaid squeaked, "but I — it's half past midnight, my lady, and I — I —"

Hermione Confounded her with a whispered word, and the maid lurched past them, babbling, and made for the stairwell.

"Why didn't you Confound her in the first place?!" Snape snarled.

"It seemed like a better idea to —"

"Well it's not!" His voice cracked. "You and Lupin and Longbottom all — what is the obsession
with seeing me in female attire, may I ask?"

"Begging my lady's pardon," and Hermione, grinning, gave the train a shake, "but I don't care what you wear. It's what you do that matters, and the fact that you make an extremely convincing Lady Catherine de Bourgh," she looked him up and down, "is surely more an indictment of your personality than of your fashion sense."

"You think me somehow less powerful because I have been decked in damask, Miss Granger?" Snape whirled on her, and Unspeakable instinct set her skin crawling, because that glare could cut glass. Come to think of it, it would do for the glass and the glaze of Sir Lewis de Bourgh's storied windows. "Well, you shall see. Carry on."

He set a rapid pace down the hallway; Hermione half-ran to keep up. And she had to carry on, literally, as her arms were full of the superfluous folds of the dress.

After an indeterminable period, Snape stopped in front of a door. He practically tore the brass knocker off its hinges, knocking. Hermione hardly had time to yelp in protest before the door opened from the inside.

A short, thin, somewhat sallow young woman fixed them with a challenging stare, and tucked a dark curl under her nightcap.

Hermione blinked. "This is it?"

Snape didn't answer.

She let the train drop, and poked him in one whalebone-corseted side. "This? This is the perpetrator of plot chaos? Snape, she looks as though she couldn't plot her way out of a paper bag."

The stranger sniffed. "A bag made of paper; nonsense. One might as well make a tippet from thyme."

Something about her voice made Hermione's heartbeat slow – and slow and slow along with time as her pulse suddenly echoed through her ears, and Snape made a low bow, never taking his eyes from the stranger, and said:

"Witch Austen, I presume."

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"You presume incorrectly, madam.” One plucked eyebrow darted up, and the stranger – *Austen*?! Hermione's thoughts whirled – gave Snape a once-over reminiscent of a housewife eyeing a herring, albeit a housewife with poor opinion of both fish and monger.

"And why is that?"

"Why, that I am Miss Anne de Bourgh, and that you have woken me from a sound sleep, and that I require one very good reason to refrain from calling a footman."

"Well, try this on: you are no more Anne de Bourgh than I am Mary Bennet," Hermione sputtered, butting in, "and neither of us belongs here! Return Professor Snape and me to our own time and place at once!"

"La, such demands, and at such an hour." Austen – was it really *Austen*? – draped a delicate hand over her yawn. "And no words from you – ah, Mr. Snape, is it? Not a curse, not a wish?"

Snape shut his mouth with a snap, then gritted out: "I wish to ask you many things, Miss Austen."

Hermione took a moment to be pleased that he had been gobsmacked too – but her pleasure did not last, as the-person-that-might-be-Austen took that opportunity to fix him with a sly smile and plant a kiss on his lips.

After one long, appalled minute, Hermione hissed: "Oi!"

Austen drew back; her smile curled up at the corners. "Do modulate your voice, my dear young lady. My, what arts you possess, Madam ..."

Snape was making a high-pitched noise, rather like a teakettle. Taking one look at his face – *perhaps he's going into shock*? – Hermione made a quick decision. Fight fire with fire – politesse with politesse.

"My dear Miss de Bourgh," she said, in a sugary voice. "What, exactly, are you doing?"

More curls escaped the cap, as the other woman tossed her head. "What I wish, for once."

"Then, am I to understand, from your behavior, Miss de Bourgh (for that, it seems, is what I must call you) – that your wish is to embrace – with untoward lewdness! – an unknown gentleman dressed to look like your mother?"
Silence.

Hermione tsked. "That … is highly improper."

"And Lord forbid I be improper! If I am a wild beast, I cannot help it –" The stranger gave her a mutinous look, and threw her cap on the floor. "Very well. I am Miss Jane Austen – and you may dispense with the pleasantries. They become you as well as that sprigged muslin – which is to say," she sniffed, "not at all."

"Yes," rasped Snape. "This is rather beside the point. Miss Austen – you are here, presumably, to enjoy watching the plot of your own creation unfold, but are you insensible to the danger of letting other plots intrude upon it?"

"O, la!" Austen laughed. "No, that was just to get your attention! You are rather thick, the pair of you - has none ever seen fit to mention it?"

Hermione stood mute – a glance at Snape confirmed he was doing the same.

The author snatched her cap from the floor and gave them a tight smile. "And it seems I have your attention. But you still do not understand why you are here – do you?"

"Why let other characters into 'Pride and Prejudice'?" Hermione said, and: "Why did you want our attention?" Snape echoed.

"Think about it." Austen's look turned arch. "And find me again when you have reached a conclusion, will you not?"

She laughed – and former Professor Snape and current Unspeakable Granger gasped in tandem, as Austen turned on one slippered heel and vanished into thin air.

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"No!" Snape bellowed. "Track her!"

Hermione rapidly cast an echo damper and a memory charm perimeter (both invaluable in the Taj Mahal Incident) and then kicked him in one damask-covered shin. "Shut up!"

"Track her!" he snarled in a half-whisper. "Do it now!"

The spine-tingling effect of his voice was somewhat spoiled by his hopping around on one foot. Hermione stifled a snicker, and cupped the crystal ball in both hands –

– only to be taken aback. "She's gone!"

"Well of course she is," he growled. "She bloody well Disapparated – so track her!"

"No, I mean magically." Hermione rubbed one sleeve over the crystal. "No trace – no trail – she's either covering her tracks extremely well, or …"

"Or?"

"Or she can move from place to place without magic – and since it is her novel – I mean, I hate to say it, but –"

"But she can probably move through it at will," Snape finished. Then he bit his lower lip – and Hermione had to stare at the gesture, so unaccustomed was she to any sign of indecision on that
"Damn. She buggers off to berth unknown, and we're left gaping like a pair of loons ..."

"Speak for yourself."

"Yes – well." Snape took off his immense hat, and began to shake dust from it; a flush stood out over his stark cheekbones. "At least you didn't have Jane Sodding Austen try to jam her tongue down your throat whilst you were impersonating her mother."

"Austen's mother?"

"No," he said, snide, glaring at the ostrich feathers. "And just as well – I understand Mrs. Austen was missing several teeth."

Something about his frown of concentration, as he thumped the overgrown hat with a fist, made her swallow, swallow and say: "Nothing a good dentist couldn't fix."

"Hmph." He was gearing up for another rant; she ignored the warning signs, and her heart pounding in her ears, and stepped closer.

"It may have escaped your notice, Miss Granger, but good dentists do not exist in the Regency era. Indeed, "good" and "dentist" – and "fix," for that matter – had no business being in the same sentence until the twentieth century ..."

The flow of his words dried up as Hermione carefully leaned forward to kiss him on the mouth.

A long moment passed. She heard only the rustle of damask, and felt his lips tremble against hers, and the callused fingertips of one hand brushed hesitantly over the side of her face, then retreated –

Snape broke the kiss, and gasped for breath. "What," he gulped, "was that?"

Hermione smiled. "That was a kiss."

"Well, yes," and he sounded disoriented, "but I don't understand – I mean, why would you –"

She leaned in. "I suppose I am ferociously put out that Miss Jane Austen should dare do what I have not ..." She kissed him again.

This time, Snape tentatively returned the kiss; at least, until he jerked his head away and said, "And why haven't you?"

Hermione brushed her lips over his. "I'm not sure." A kiss. "Uncertainty –" another kiss – "impropriety –" another kiss – "or perhaps I'm just – shy ..."

Snape twined his long fingers in her hair, and gazed at her with those eyes – molten black, and glittering – "You, shy?" and – was that a smile? On anyone else it might have been, on Snape it was a mere glimmer – but there ... "Words fail me," he whispered, and then he stepped closer.

"Good," Hermione breathed, as he kissed her – and her breath hitched as he caught her lips – and tongue oh my god – just so – "Ah" – and her mouth was muffled in the bloody best way possible.

He let her up for air, and she gasped, "Ah – Severus –"

And then she cursed herself, as she felt him stiffen. "I'm sorry," Hermione murmured, "I forgot ..." She cupped the side of his face in one of her hands. "You'd rather face a prison ship than hear
"As it happens," he murmured – she felt his breath puff over her mouth; "You have transported me already, so you might as well add insult to happy injury and call me Severus."

"Severus," she echoed, happily.

He kissed her again – "Hermione –" and she could feel his voice reverberate down to her toes. He tasted like mint tea, and the damask was slippery beneath her fingers, as she ran inquisitive hands over lace and buttons – and then remembered …

"Hermione," he whispered. "This cannot go on."

She blinked. "What? Why – why not?"

"You are kissing me …" He bit her lower lip, gently, "… and it is delightful …" he soothed it with a kiss, "… and I am still dressed as Lady Catherine de Bourgh."

"Highly improper," Hermione whispered back. She held the orb and whispered; the transfigured costumes melted away.

Then she became aware of something even more improper.

"Gracious me." She pressed closer. "I thought you did not have a wand on your person, Mr. Snape."

"Miss Granger," he purred, "I believe Austen never saw a wand in her life."

"I could almost pity her … but …"

"… 'But'?"

"But, she kissed my Potions Master." Hermione did the same. He returned the kiss, with interest, but then broke off to say:

"Apothecary's Assistant."

"Stuff and nonsense." She drew back and gripped his shoulders, smiling. "All we have to do is reverse the spell, get out of "Pride and Prejudice" and back to Hogwarts, and you'll be a Potions Master again – and you'll get your Order of Merlin."

A line appeared between his brows. "Really?"

"First class." Hermione smiled even more broadly. "It's on display at the museum –"

"Well." Severus interrupted, folding his hands around hers. "The less said about museums, the better. No, I am concerned with the plot here, Miss Granger –"

"Hermione!"

A rueful half-smile. "Hermione. Why are we here? Where has Austen gone? And how can we find her again?"

"To the third – the same way we did before – which will answer the second, and, once found, she will answer the first. So …"

"… I had best continue the search."
Hermione grinned up at him. "And I will keep the plot on track, at Longbourn."

"Very well." Severus arched an eyebrow. "I will keep journeying – you follow events in that crystal – and shall we keep each other posted?"

"Oh, we'll wear out the pigeon," Hermione sighed. "Poor thing."

"Poor thing, to fly to your chamber each and every night." He grinned outright as she flushed pink. "I daresay he'll survive."

The thrill that coursed through her, as he placed his hands at her waist, was due to Apparation (Hermione told herself, as she gripped the crystal ball) – and certainly not to anything so forward and precipitate as the words Severus whispered against her lips as magic whirled them back to Longbourn.

**************************
In Which Hermione Deplores both Pride and Prejudice

MM – DOM; Clearance Level: Blue
Field Report; Dicta-Scroll 15610.B2
Uns. Hermione Granger

Margin – merlin do they EVER stop talking?! i ought to [nb inkblot. Hand 4]
all gore and no brains makes you a dull boy [Hand 5]
well I am not talking -> bleeding Rclaws abt sodding eppis epistol
I'll look better doing it any way [5]
true [4]

Longbourn, near Meryton, Hertfordshire
2 January
My dear – oh dear. Mr. Snape? Severus? My pen is as bewildered as I am.
It has been twenty-four hours, and I have decided I cannot exist without you. This must be
infatuation of the most powerful sort. Write a line, a word, and relieve the impassioned yearnings of
your Hermione
(ever yours, I am not joking)

A Haystack, Kent
3 January
My only Hermione,
A line: I have created a monster. Do control yourself, woman. Otherwise you shall be as great a
fool as
your Severus
(who cannot exist without you, either, truly.)

Longbourn, near Meryton, Hertfordshire
10 January
My Severus,
A week has sufficed to compose me. Also, it was necessary to remove Frederick Wentworth's ship
(the Asp) from a precarious position atop a barn in the nearby countryside; how it got there I
have no idea. The gentleman himself was discomposed, but as he was suffering from the effects of
copious drink, he believed it all a dream – and I was saved a memory charm.
Undoubtedly, his beloved Anne has just jilted him; thus the liquor. Thus she would not mind my taking one of his buttons as a souvenir of his dream-visit – for he was charming, in a sozzled sort of way.

The walk to Meryton is quite dirty. Mr. Bennet has reread “The Consolation of Philosophy.” Mrs. Bennet bewails Mr. Bingley’s absence day in, day out. Nothing else to report.

How goes your search? And do tell me more about Jane Austen – I have had a sudden sensation that the Muggle side of her is not all that exists, although it is all known by yours, etc.

Hermione

(PS don’t you dare refer me to a bibliography. tho’ it would be like you. I’d have to cram the list into my bodice and sleep with it close to my heart every night.)

***

Cheapside, London

12 January

My dear Hermione,

I have received yours, and will devote a morning to answering it. Well, perhaps not quite a full morning, as I am due to leave London for Bath on the 11 o’clock post.

The search continues unprofitable, for Witch Austen, as I call her now, has shown her true, sorcerous colors. You know her as the dutiful daughter of a clergyman; so is she remembered in Winchester Cathedral. The majority of her six novels have stuck like burrs in the creative imagination. Well done, Miss Austen the Muggle, spinster of this parish.

But not known (by many) are the concealed, convoluted beginnings of Austen's publication history. “Susan,” (as “Northanger Abbey” was first called) came under the eye of a super-alert Ministry of Magic official – he detected enough magic in it to order the publisher not to publish. (I believe the majestic sum of ten pounds exchanged hands.) Magical law, then, did not take into account whether magic was woven into literature consciously or unconsciously. “Susan” was not published, and Austen brooded on the same for quite some time. At the time of writing “Susan,” her powers were not fully fledged; later, they would have nearly disastrous consequences for her career.

For when her parents moved her to Bath, from Steventon, the upheaval and stress led Austen to pour more than her usual energy into her novel of which Muggles have only a fragment, known as “The Watsons.” Again, what Muggles know as her first two published novels were at that time still in manuscript form, as “Elinor and Marianne,” and “First Impressions.” But with “The Watsons,” Austen allowed her power to carry her through great adversity: writing through her father’s death, relocating to ever more shabby quarters in Bath, and finding a publisher, as a single, poor, dead clergyman's daughter. (She had the help of her cousin Eliza de Feuillide, married to her brother Henry, tho’ no help from her disgustingly rich (and adopted out) brother, Edward Knight.)

“The Watsons” was published, though under a title that, by magical law, cannot be named. “But why?!” I hear you ask. (I also picture you waving your hand in the air. Insatiable creature.) Do
you see whereto these veiled words tend? Surely you do; you were always quite fiendishly clever.

The novel formerly known as “The Watsons” became the novel about which you have undoubtedly read – its powers dispersed through the safe mediation of commentary, historiography, etc. You know of the book: the infamous Bath creation – a work so potent that no one could stop reading it. Readers walked round, trying to go about their daily lives, with their noses buried in its pages. They slept with it draped o'er their faces, woke up bedewed with ink. The first printing run only produced a thousand copies, and the Ministry very quickly intervened (once they grasped the effect of this novel.) All copies of That Bath Book were seized and burned. The publisher's plates were destroyed. And the Ministry paid Miss Austen a visit.

Nobody knows what was said there. With her cousin Eliza's encouragement (and diplomatic Ministry visits – it is thought E. de F. was a witch, though not one out of the ordinary way), Austen later (much later!) published “Elinor and Marianne,” and “First Impressions” – “lopt and cropt” (as she put it) into “Sense and Sensibility” and “Pride and Prejudice.” She then wrote three more novels, in rapid succession – “Mansfield Park,” “Emma,” and “Persuasion” – all within four years.

And then she died.

Hers was a strange existence, navigating between the surely bewildering rules of the magical world and the social demands and pressures of the Muggle one. Such would be enough to crush a person of weaker parts; all it did to Austen, it seems, was add spice to her grudge.

For I believe she has a grudge, my dear Hermione. One of her greatest novels was taken from her and destroyed. Surely we cannot imagine her thoughts on the subject. I believe she has a grudge – a knife to hone, a bone to pick, a great and terrible vengeance to brew – and I ought to know, since I was a champion grudge-holder. But given Witch Austen’s dramatic gifts, surely the fruit of her grudge will be nothing short of spectacular.

And if we don't find her, we will never see this plot's denouement. So, searching, ever searching, I remain quite insatiably curious, and

ever yours,

Severus Snape

(Addendum: I have missed the 11 o'clock to Bath. It is all your fault. And keep your mitts off Frederick Wentworth, or I shall have to challenge him to a duel.)

(Further: if you are charmed by those in liquor, I will do my best to make it a habit.)

(Furthermore: Austen was, perhaps, equally frustrate from being female. Your thoughts?)

(and finally: you taunt me, woman. I dream of bibliography and your breasts, side-by-side – an unheard- of delight. I tell you the truth: not even Solomon in all his splendor - and with his thousand lissome loves - had the prospect of such glory before him.)

***

Longbourn, near Meryton, Hertfordshire

19 January

Severus,
I will pretend you did not pen that penultimate addendum. And the salacious sacreligion of the last aside - in all seriousness: if you wish to cover your own insecurities with a blanket of petty chauvinism, you will remind me of Ronald Weasley. Do you truly wish it so? You will never see my breasts, if you do. (That usually kept Ron in line.)

Also, if it is to be pistols at dawn, I am fairly sure Wentworth would wing you. Then again, you'd probably poison him before he picked a second, so in all respects 'twould be a fair match. I prefer you alive, so I have sewn his button into the back of a sampler, to mystify those at the Victoria and Albert down the line.

I read with fascination your account of the times and troubles of Witch Austen. I am all the more eager to know her personally. If I may be pardoned my arrogance, I think we should suit very well. We could at least enjoy a snug chat about the insufferable prejudice of wizardkind.

Forgive my ill temper. The pianoforte is out of tune, Mr. Bennet is out of humor, Mrs. Bennet is insufferable and Lydia more so. The better I am acquainted with Lizzy, the more I am disconcerted. Tho’ of sparkling wit and incisive intelligence, she occasionally looks through me in the same way her father does. If I ever patronize or overlook a deadly threat in my midst, may I rely on you to point it out? I shall do the same in return. (I could make her fall in love, you know, with a potion – to have her panting after Sir William Lucas would remedy my mood nicely.)

Any progress in the search?

Yours ever,

Hermione

(PS How did you learn so much about Witch Austen? Inquiring minds wish to know.)

***

A Stark Crag which promises Romanticism, Cornwall

27 January

My love,

Your threats of poison mend my soul. I shall make you a Slytherin yet. Slip Mrs. Bennet a calming draught, and for Lydia: tea of violets. Not that she'll drink it, but it leaves a lovely stain. Aim for that white cambric number she's so chuffed about.

Little progress. I will try Yorkshire next, but my ideas are wearing thin. (I have no qualms about admitting such to you, because you know that a thin idea of mine is worth seven fat ones of another.)

Yours,

Severus

(addendum: I took a Muggle literature elective unit (one of Dumbledore's more foolish ideas, and that's saying something.) A friend and I drew “Pride and Prejudice” out of a hat. I did the research; the friend did the talking. It profited us nothing, until now. And incidentally ... salacious? That trifle is in the holy writ, I'll have you know. Blame me for many things, my dearest love, but not for King Solomon's concubines.)

***
Longbourn, near Meryton, Hertfordshire

2 February

My dear Severus,

That's it: I'm taking out the crystal ball and joining the search (by proxy). This has gone on quite long enough. I will keep you appraised of my search for Witch Austen.

Emma sends her regards. Might I recommend more food for our poor Pigeon, on your end? He looks increasingly bedraggled when he brings me your letters.

with love,

Hermione

(PS This 'friend' wouldn't have happened to be Lucius Malfoy, would it?)

***

Newgate, London

9 February

My dear love,

I have tried to feed the pigeon, but he pecks me. What progress?

yours ever,

Severus

(add: right in one. I suppose you read the inscriptions before you got sucked in. Am I right?)

***

Longbourn, near Meryton, Hertfordshire

10 February

NEWGATE??!!

H.

(PS How did you know the mechanics of my entrapment?)

***

Newgate, London

11 February

It's a long story. Progress?

S.

(add: I'm willing to take credit for a lucky guess.)
Longbourn, near Meryton, Hertfordshire

14 February

Happy Valentine’s Day – and good news: Witch Austen is at present impersonating a chambermaid at Lambton. Which is to say: Pemberley. Why am I not surprised?

You are undoubtedly too proud and close to safeguard me the story of your imprisonment. But, knowing you, you have planned a daring escape, and details of the same would thrill

your Hermione

(PS That's not an answer to my question.)

The Underside of London Bridge, London

15 February

Of course Pemberley – this is “Pride and Prejudice” – all plots lead to Pemberley! I have long wished to see it, so I shall meet you at its gates on March 10 (only after Eliza Bennet leaves for Rosings.) Make arrangements for the concealment of your absence – we neither know how long Witch Austen will see fit to entertain herself with us.

You have anticipated my daring escape, and we both have anticipated E.’s visit to Rosings. The latter turns me smug, and the former turns my head, as you were always a genius of strategy, in the eyes of

SS

(Add: look! something shiny!)

Longbourn, near Meryton, Hertfordshire

16 February

March 10 it is. I await the details of your escape – or perhaps you will tell me in person? Regardless, I am glad you are not transported for crimes unknown.

HG

(PS I am not kidding. I have the orb here, in case you forget.)

the north road, outside London

17 February

To Pemberley, therefore, we are to go. I will not live until the moment I hold you in my arms.

S.
(addendum: You are preferable to Australia, no matter how delicious the kangaroo, but don't think that means you can threaten me.)

***

Longbourn, near Meryton, Hertfordshire

5 March

I'll have you know that kangaroo is stringy.

until we meet, I am ever yours,

Hermione

(PS Right back at you, you ornery sod. I'm not threatening. I'm merely stating something you may have forgotten. I have the orb. And in it, your linen looks increasingly threadbare.)

***

Derbyshire

7 March

I am sure kangaroo can be marinated. And speaking of stringy, could you leave off with Mary Bennet's hair tonic? I prefer yours curly.

S.

(Add. If you want a real show, fire up that orb at half past 11 tonight.)

***

Longbourn, near Meryton, Hertfordshire

9 March

Can you never allow another the last word?! But you will have to do so, this time, as Pigeon will not outstrip me in the flight to Pemberley, where you will see (after this long while)

HG (with curly hair, because I want to, not because you told me to)

(PS Quite an impressive spectacle, but you did not answer my question. I will tease the answer from you in a way torturous or pleasurable – after all, there are different strokes for different folks.)

(PPS I can't believe I just wrote that. You have utterly corrupted me. I will now turn Fordyce's Sermons to the wall, and fire up for the journey ahead.)

**********************
The March air nipped her ears, in Derbyshire of the north, as Hermione cautiously turned in place at the gates to Pemberley Wood. She did not see anything out of the ordinary; merely a great number of stars glimmering in the darkness.

Hermione had time to think, and a new environment in which to do so. The cold shadows and silence led her thoughts down unwelcome paths.

She had duplicated her letters unconsciously; an Unspeakable habit, requiring only a simple spell whilst scrawling her signature of the day. Before Apparating to Pemberley, she had read through them all again … and had faced two unwelcome realizations.

First, and most obviously: Severus was hiding something. Her less suspicious side pointed out, cheerfully, that this was as to say that water was wet.

But what was he hiding? …

Hermione bit her lip. The second realization followed close on the heels of the first: and that had to do with her being in love. Because it would appear that she was. What was Snape hiding? Had he slipped her a love potion? Surely, to make Unspeakable Granger swoon from sensibility would either require a jorum of Amortentia, or the conjoining of personality, mind, and body as improbable as the planets falling in line and doing the conga …

She sighed, and scuffed a shoe along the frost-hardened dirt of the path to Pemberley Wood. Was this just an echo of her past, speaking? All brain and no heart; all thought and little feeling; if only you would come out with me, Hermione – if only you would let yourself go, Hermione – if only you would (insert random sexual act here), Hermione …

She cursed under her breath, but then something caught at the corner of her eye – a shadow unfolding from the woods – oh dear …

"You're slipping," she said, softly enough – but the words carried.

"Not so." Severus walked toward her, smiling. "I am as sure-footed as that cat of yours."

"No – I mean, I saw you." Hermione plaited her fingers around the orb, which she had set to glowing, and tried to keep an absurd grin from spreading over her face, even as her heart practically thumped through her chest. "From what I understand of espionage, that's just not on."

He stopped an arm's length away from her. "Hmm."
"'Hmm' what?"

"Your hair." Severus carefully took a curl between thumb and index finger. "I rather like it."

The fireworks that his voice set off in her stomach made her mind sit up and intervene; before she could control her tongue, she said, "Have you given me a love potion?"

"What?"

"Have – you – given – me – a love potion? Because this has never happened, this – outright infatuation in less time than it takes to grow a Borgia Bluebell –"

"– and if you put that in a love potion, don't come crying to me when your intended boils from the inside out –"

"– and it's just not anything that's ever happened to me!"

Severus tilted his head, and considered. "I could say: what a shame … but instead I shall make myself vulnerable, and say … that I feel the same way."

Hermione swallowed hard. "Really?"

"Really." He carefully set the curl down on her shoulder. "I was wondering whether or not you had cast a spell on me, with that orb of yours – but then I realized that I was in 'Pride and Prejudice.'"

"And that is important – why?"

A sigh. "Simply because that was one way matters of the heart were negotiated, in this world. If you're lucky, you become infatuated with an individual of family, connexions, and fortune, and you're wed and in bed in a few months. Remember Charlotte's disagreement with Elizabeth –"

"Yeah, I had ringside tickets to that one."

"You make it sound so dramatic! when all they did was talk."

"That's all Austen reported. I saw them go out back and continue the argument at a somewhat higher volume, and …"

Snape looked thunderstruck. "And?!"

Hermione smirked, and flicked a snowflake off her heavy shawl. "Not telling."

"You're lying."

"Think that way, if you must."

"I shall not think that way, because you are distracting me. Witness Charlotte Lucas, then, as an opposite case: she walks right into a hideous marriage of necessity, of her own volition, within less than two months. And she makes something acceptable out of it through careful management, eventually –"

"Which will hopefully stop Lizzy from bitching about it every other day, Merlin –"

" – and then there's Lizzy herself – infatuated with Wickham, but nothing came of it (fortunately), disgusted by Mr. Collins, and nothing came of it (again, most fortunately), and then … first angry
with, but then grateful to Mr. Darcy for his passion for her. I ask you: how many epic romances are founded on common gratitude?"

"It's not like that," Hermione said, stung. "It becomes more."

"Hm, perhaps," he sniffed. "Regardless, for all three of these models, the same fate waited: marriage, the legal doctrine of coverture, and a child every other year – if all the bits worked."

She winced. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Well, perhaps Mr. Darcy would be thoughtful enough to leave his wife alone, occasionally – but Austen's own brother, Edward Knight, kept his wife so continually pregnant that she died of an aortic dissection soon after the birth of her eleventh child."

"Oh, for fuck's sake –"

"Exactly."

"But that's –"

"– what awaited a good many women. More seriously: if at any time an Austen heroine offends you, consider …" and Severus counted on his fingers. "Six novels – six heroines – the odds are that at least one will die in childbirth. Perhaps it will be Fanny Price – her state of health is the most indifferent of them all –"

"For shame, sir! Why wish death on Miss Price?!"

He glowered. "Miss Price that was gave me a shilling on the road north, and sweetly urged me to buy some bread – she could have offered me a bleeding ride but no – I would get mud on her precious coach and interrupt her mooning over that lump of a husband of hers –"

"It is a shame that people think so poorly of her – although some did call her insipid."

"I know," Severus said, "and Hermione, you –"

But Hermione had gone still. "That wasn't me."

Severus, too, froze, and swore under his breath. And then, as both of them stayed immobile, straining their ears – they heard a light laugh.

"La! The looks on your faces."

"Miss Austen – Witch Austen," Hermione said, exasperated, "why do you insist on saying, "La"? 'Tis worthy of Kitty and Lydia, not you."

"Well, my dear, I believe that when I wish your opinion, I will solicit it." Footsteps crunched closer, over the frost, and then –

Austen's face shimmered into view, in the crystal light. Her eyes glittered down at the orb. "Now that is a pretty picture …"

Hermione tightened her grip, and carefully thought through several spells. Severus had put both hands in the pockets of his ragged greatcoat – she heard a clinking noise.

"But leave off your sorcery, for I am not come here with conflict in mind," Austen said, grave.

"Oh, really," Snape drawled.
"Yes. In fact – and my thanks to you both for arguing so loudly, since it made you quite easy to find – in fact, the reason I am here is that events have come to a head, and: Mr. Snape, Miss Granger – I need your help."

Hermione and Severus had mutely followed the brisk, small figure in a maid's dress for a moment or two, and then neither of them could talk fast enough.

"Modulate your voices, please," Austen finally hissed. "Quiet is of the utmost importance."

"Who are we sneaking up on?" Snape said.

"'Upon whom are we sneaking?' You'll see." The author walked down a few graveled steps into a grotto, by the edge of a pond in Pemberley Wood, near the coppice path –

"Elizabeth longed to explore its windings …" Hermione murmured, remembering.

Austen threw her a sharp look. "Yes, well, it's just as well she didn't, before I had the chance to clear away the leavings of Mr. Darcy's Druidic ancestors."

Severus sputtered: "What?" as they followed her to a rusty gate.

"You must remember," said Austen, examining the intricate lock, "that I was very young indeed when I began writing this novel. So one occasionally comes across a remnant of my – shall we say exuberant imagination." She took a key out of her reticule.

"Unbelievable," he murmured.

"If it's a choice between juvenilia and characters crossing over into novels not their own …" Hermione shrugged. "I for one would much rather happen across a henge or two than run into Lady Susan in Mr. Rushworth's ha-ha."

"That sounds absolutely filthy." Severus grinned. "I love it."

The key turned in the lock, and the gates opened with a screech. Austen looked pleased. "I am only happy that someone sees fit to read and comment upon the exploits of the widow of Lord Vernon."

Hermione thought to the reams of Austen scholarship cramming the University shelves, where she had worked as a drone prefatory to the unveiling of the Cambridge Coven. "You have no idea."

"Right – follow me," the other woman said. "There is a secret tunnel here, but it would not do for you to be lost."

"I should say not," Severus agreed. They trooped after her post-haste, and the rusty gates creaked shut behind them.

It was only after they passed the third charnel-house cache of human bones that Hermione started to worry. "Where did you say this passage leads, again?"

Severus hit his head on a stalactite for the umpteenth time, and cursed.

Austen blew a curl away from her own sweaty forehead. "To Pemberley House – but I wonder
very much if – *ah.*" She pointed to a ring in the ceiling. "There."

Severus strode forward, grabbed it, and pulled. A trap-door opened; Hermione saw dust billow through the beams of orb-light.

"Such a charming man!" Austen gushed, "so handsome! so tall!"

"Handsome?" Hermione snorted. Severus threw her a wounded look, dusting himself off – she smiled. "Oh come now, my love – I'm infatuated with you, not blind."

He smiled back. "True enough. Would that my superiority of appearance balanced your superiority of rank – but I suppose I will content myself with being your unequal in every respect."

"Not in brains," she said, fondly. "And your eyes are very fine."

"My Hermione … do you realize that we haven't kissed since we met again?"

*I beg* your pardon, both of you." Austen's voice was frosty. "But I need a hand up, since impropriety alone is insufficient to propel me through the ceiling."

Severus hoisted her into the opening, then did the same with Hermione. He pulled himself up, graceful as a cat, and pulled the trap-door shut after him. "Well, Witch Austen – lead the way."

Austen looked down complacently at the grime streaking her apron. "How I abhor this livery – it does the heart good to see it besmirched. Very well: let us go. And you have laid hands upon my waist – and you," she beamed at Hermione, "have read "Lady Susan" … so you might as well both call me Jane."

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They walked through dusty rooms, crammed with ancient furniture and laced with cobwebs. Hermione kept the orb held high, and Severus had at least one hand in a pocket at all times. She might have been puzzled by this, except that he had *clanked* suspiciously when he had lifted her. His coat had *clinked* again, several times, when he had drawn back a tapestry dribbled with gore, and messed about with something behind it until she had called for him to catch up.

"Jane," she called, proud of the fact that her voice didn't waver, even after she had tripped over what looked horribly like a femur, "I thought that Mr. Darcy had good taste."

"I know for a fact that he does." Austen's voice floated back to her. "But see here."

They caught up to her, standing in front of an immense cabinet. With a grim look, Austen threw open its doors. There, with shackles around its wrists, and rotting hanks of blonde hair on its skull, hung a full-length human skeleton.

"Oh, *ugh*," Hermione groaned; she had seen worse, in the Great Labyrinth, but that didn't mean she had to like it. Severus snorted.

"Indeed." Jane looked at the skeleton thoughtfully. "Given that Mr. Darcy is in no way addicted to locking up his sister, or otherwise ensuing her dreadful demise, I must conclude that we are not in Pemberley."

"Oh, did it take you that long to figure it out?" Snape hissed, turning on his heel to look in corners.

Austen *tsked*. "There's no need to be rude. Besides, I've always wanted to pay this place a visit –
and it makes sense that the villain of the piece should choose to stage a final confrontation on the ramparts – of Castle Udolpho!"

Hermione blinked. "Which villain?"

Severus sighed. "Udolpho?"

Sudden lightning flashed from outside; Austen clapped her hands. "Oh, how charmingly horrid! Now that I know he has picked such a Gothic vehicle to express his displeasure, I am far more convinced that he can be persuaded to leave off his schemes. Had he been lurking in Maple Grove, I would have been more disconcerted."

"Yes, but my dear Jane," Hermione said, half-running to keep up as Austen took off at a rapid clip, "of whom are you talking?"

"Here!" Austen jogged up a spiral staircase, and Hermione began to follow. "He's up here!"

Something twigged Unspeakable Granger's instincts, though, and she paused, and looked back. Severus was staring up at her, at the base of the spiral staircase, his face dreadfully white in the crystal's glow.

Oh …

"Oh …" Hermione gulped. "Oh, Severus, it's not the same tower."

He stared at her, mute, a moment longer. Then he rasped, "It's one of the last things I remember."

"It's not – it's not –" She held out her free hand. "We're far away from there. And just because it was a melodramatic climax on top of a Gothic edifice – doesn't mean that this will be the same. Come on."

He remained frozen, staring at her.

"My love," Hermione whispered, "Take my hand." She smiled. "We can't leave Jane on her own, after all."

"True." He shook himself, and walked up the steps. "Who knows what she would do."

"She might deploy Lady Dalrymple, and then where would we be?" Hermione said, lightly – but there was nothing light about his grip on her hand, nor about her returning grasp.

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They climbed the spiral staircase, and emerged on top of the tower – only to see Jane Austen, hands on her hips, facing a well-made, dark man, looking somehow both heartbreakingly handsome and mindbreakingly potty.

Jane turned back to beam at them. "Ah, there you are. Allow me to make the introductions – Miss Hermione Granger, Mr. Severus Snape – Mr. Thomas Musgrave."

"Thomas Musgrave?" Hermione echoed. She scrambled to place him, in the library of her mind, but Severus beat her to the punch, the swot.

"Of the fragment we know as 'The Watsons,'" Severus finished. "Tom Musgrave. Ordinarily, it would be a pleasure, sir, but if you are responsible for the mayhem wreaked in this fair plot, I make you no compliments. I do not enquire after your health. And I certainly do not point out that
if you dance any closer to the edge of this tower, you'll bloody well break your head falling."

"Alas!" Tom Musgrave wailed. "I am doomed to walk these pages with no surcease! no comfort! I, who could have been the greatest of them all!"

"O, dear," Jane said. "My dear Mr. Musgrave, you must control yourself. There is indeed refuge for you – you and any other discarded character is welcome to take tea with me in my traveling parlor – I make the yearly rounds –"

"Discarded!" he bellowed. "Rejected! Cast aside! And you offer me TEA!"

"Well, it is a Royal Ceylon –"

"Um, Jane?" Hermione interrupted. "He might have a point."

"She agrees! She agrees with me. I was ripped from my existence by untimely magic, but such is my own strength that I cannot be killed! and now, I walk without an end through the existing oeuvre, lamenting my lost life and love – ah, my love! my Emma Watson!"

Severus frowned. "I thought you made a sport of leading all four sisters on short strings."

Tom Musgrave did not leave off his wailing, even though Jane said: "'Tis true, indeed."

"So he doesn't have a point?" Hermione asked.

"No!" Austen snapped. "He exists in part – I used a variation of his name in Persuasion –"

"That creature?! A gormless slug of a squire?! I –"

" – do be quiet, Mr. Musgrave – and I used a good deal of his character in fleshing out Henry Crawford –"

" – not fully committed to his villainy!"

"Yes," Austen murmured. "Yes, my own brother Henry had words on that score … But come now, Musgrave, do be sensible. The Osbornes makes no trouble –"

" – they were pale imitations of Darcy and de Bourgh! How can theirs compare to my torment –"

" – and nor does Emma Watson herself –"

"She got Emma WOODHOUSE!"

"O, come now Mr. Musgrave! How can I persuade you?!"

Hermione looked at Severus, who was hiding a smile behind his hand. "It appears he is beyond persuasion, Jane."

"I have not yet begun to persuade, but …" Austen scowled. "Perhaps we are behind our time. But then what are we to do?"

"Well …" and Severus' smile widened.

Hermione froze. She knew that look …

"Where persuasion fails …" he took out a long and spindly glass vial, "I always enjoy using …"
He snapped the vial in half –

**BOOM**

– and Hermione was thrown off her feet and half deafened by the explosion echoing from the bowels of the castle.

Severus grinned. "… my own particular magic."

"Severus, you **didn’t** –" Hermione gasped.

"Oh, I certainly did." The grin grew wider. "Goodbye, Castle Udolpho. Goodbye, Mr. Musgrave."

"What?" Jane breathed, and "**Where?!**" Hermione screeched.

"Potion bomb, in the dumbwaiter."

"Quite ingenious," Austen said, her eyes gleaming. She continued speaking, but could not be heard over Musgrave's wails, and the rumble of stone grinding beneath them.

"Ah, yes, my favorite brew." Severus looked like the cat who had eaten the entire canary population at the local petting zoo. "Rocks fall – everyone dies. An excellent way to resolve any narrative difficulty."

Stone gargoyles began to tumble from the tower to the ground – Hermione took a look, and regretted it, because the ground was a long way down. She whirled back, "It may have escaped your notice, but I **do not** want to die!"

He blinked. "Oh, yes, of course. Shall we go, then?"

Hermione ran to his side. "Fire up that crystal," he said, swooping one side of his greatcoat around her, "and power the magic – I'll chant the flying spell in your ear."

"Flying spell?"

"It was taught me, in case I'd ever have to leave Hogwarts in an unexpected way – and though this is not Hogwarts, still, the time is right –"

"Pardon me –"

They both turned, to see Jane Austen, standing between them and Tom Musgrave. He was at present pounding the roof stones with his fists; she was as pale as parchment, with her mouth set. When she spoke again, her voice was low, and a trifle … Hermione stared. Uncertain? Austen? Surely not – but she was saying:

"My dear sir, my dear young lady – I cannot say that I wish to die, either."

Both Severus and Hermione were at a loss for words.

Jane continued, "I did once. It was thoroughly unpleasant. It lasted quite some time, and the pain was excruciating … and … I have no desire to repeat the experience."

"Of course not," Severus said, and his voice was soft. "I never doubted your sincerity – only your meaning, as I never thought you bound by a paltry page – but here," and he slung one arm around Hermione's shoulders, and held out his other hand. "Here. Take my hand."
Austen hesitated.

"I'm not – that one." His voice was rough. "I promise."

"It's just," and her voice could hardly be heard, "the other had a black cloak, and yours is very like –"

Hermione interrupted, briskly: "If he were any representation of Death – and how Gothic a concept, Jane, really – he would be far more interested in hosting a fête for the undead in Castle Udolpho's ballroom, than in helping us escape."

"'Pride and Prejudice and Zombies' – perish the thought. Well," Jane said, taking Severus' hand and edging closer, "You must agree, good sir, that you are quite lowering enough to be Death personified."

"Could we not discuss the offenses of my person at some other time? Hands about my waist, ladies."

"That is most highly improper," but, "That's the fun part," Hermione said grinning. The crystal flared to life. "Let's go."

They leapt off the tower and flew into the darkness of the night sky, as Castle Udolpho exploded in a cataclysm of Gothic flame, to send them on their way.
Without the indulgence of the author, Unspeakable Granger would never have dared tread on Pemberley's front lawn. The fact that that same author whooped as they landed, and then laughed with them, made it all the more sweet.

The sky had the pale quality of the hour before dawn. Hermione surveyed her surroundings with satisfaction, then dusted herself off and said, "Well, this has been lovely, if somewhat full of explosives, but as Mary Bennet I must be getting home."

"Ah," Jane said, grinning and swinging her bonnet from one hand. Her dark had uncoiled from its careful arrangement. Hermione thought, fondly, that they looked somewhat alike – but then the author continued and her words set off the Unspeakable instincts – "You must be getting home in more ways than one. Home to your world; home to your time. I'll send you, shall I?"

Severus looked stricken. Hermione stalled for time. "You never did say why you brought me here, Miss – I mean, Jane. I must admit, I am curious."

Austen laughed. "I wish for a tutor in magic! I knew that there was one here, recently, but he was quite reticent! I found neither hide nor hair of him for six years. And when I had tracked him to Meryton, why then it seemed that he needed something – or someone – to bring him out of his lair."

"And that someone was I?"

"O, yes." Jane gave Severus an apologetic smile. "I am privy to the inscriptions that the owners of this book place upon it – and once I connected your schoolboy scrawl with your later hand –"

"Reading my correspondence? Shame, shame," Severus said.

"Nothing of the sort! I merely observed the directions on certain letters. In any case – once I had connected you to the owner of this volume, one Malfoy, it was easy enough to bring him to my world and ask him certain questions – and he identified you as a suitable tutor. He claimed you had considerable teaching experience –"

Severus snorted.

" – and might be interested in a situation. Well?" Jane tipped her head to one side, looking nothing more than a bright-eyed little wren.

Hermione felt curiously empty. "Then – did Malfoy strand you here, Severus?"
He ignored her, staring at Austen instead, his teeth clenched. "Before you consign me to my fate, Witch Austen, I would have a few words with Miss Granger. Alone."

A raised eyebrow. "If you insist. I'll look at Mr. Darcy's trout, shall I?"

Hermione leapt in. "Why not Mr. Darcy? You can have anyone you want – why not him?"

"O, bless you," Jane said, fondly. "I think very highly of Fitzwilliam, but we should never suit. I could never be easy with a man who could not relax into laughing at himself."

"I know for a fact that Severus has absolutely no sense of humor."

"Hm." Jane smirked. "Make your farewells."

Then she wandered away, and Hermione turned back to Severus, desperate. "You can't let her –"

"Miss Granger –"

"It's Hermione, damn it, and we saved her life! She can't keep us apart!!"

"She's the author." Snape looked weary, suddenly. "She can do whatever she damn well pleases."

"How did she trap you here? How does Lucius come into this?"

"Lucius …" He looked off into the distance. "Lucius was the last Malfoy owner of this volume …"

Hermione held her breath.

Severus sighed. "You must understand, Hermione … my life –" a tight smile, pained, "my life as I know it ended the night after I killed Dumbledore."

The words fell like stones would, into a pond. "What?" Hermione said. There was a lump in her throat.

"After I did … what I did, I took Draco to his parents. They were burning the midnight oil at Malfoy Manor, and they rushed to take care of him immediately. And while the whole house was in confusion, I found myself in the library – and," he sucked in a breath, "you must understand – I felt – I felt as though someone had stabbed a blade through me. Here." He touched his sternum. "So in the library, I looked for a book that I knew had once brought me happiness, and I found …"

"Pride and Prejudice," Hermione finished.

"Yes."

"And – killing tears the soul apart," she said, "oh Merlin, it's a Horcrux."

"I only read about those once, and until seven years ago, I did not understand …" Severus looked at his feet. "But yes: I suppose so."

"And that means … you really are dead. In the wizarding world, I mean."

He looked back up at her, eyes almost invisible, in the hollows of their sockets. "The less said about that, the better."

Hermione swallowed back sudden tears. "But – the Horcruxes we destroyed – they were all evil.
They contained parts of Voldemort's soul –"

"Is that how the old snake did it? Hm."

"– and one tried to drown Harry, and one had an image of Voldemort in it that talked to Harry and Ginny, and – and how are you – what you are?"

How are you someone I could fall in love with? she thought, but did not say.

"I suppose …" Severus looked thoughtful. "I suppose it is that no matter what magic a Horcrux contains, Jane Austen's power is such that no work of hers can ever be so hideous an evil. Perhaps it had a balancing effect – a negating one, a cleansing one. I cannot say. All I know is that here, I feel as though the best parts of me have found a home. My griping aside, I feel at home here, Hermione – I have my work, and the occasional bit of derring-do," a faint smile, "and I find I am quite content to be the apothecary's assistant."

Hermione blinked harder. "So – you're not coming back."

He grimaced. "The Severus you know probably took this "Pride and Prejudice" back to Hogwarts with him – you said he was Headmaster?"

"For a very little while, yes."

"Merlin forbid. There's no way of knowing whether or not he knew the book was a Horcrux. But I suspect that if they ever get around to painting a Headmaster's portrait of him –" "Harry's working on it."

"Potter …" He sighed. "Regardless, if they ever decide to do so, my guess is that the portrait will be somewhat spare and faded. Because – my love – I have no plans to return."

She felt one tear fall. "Even if I asked you to?"

Severus closed his eyes. "Please don't. Austen has power – an immense power – power to draw her own discarded characters in her wake, power to bring the quick and the dead under her sway. I have kept some of my memories, but "Pride and Prejudice" is reducing them to a patina – but you, Hermione: I remember you. My last memory of you is your eyes burning as you warned the night of Dumbledore's death – you warned me, you were out of breath from running …"

"And you knocked me over, you sod."

"Well, I had to run, too."

"Yes." She swallowed. "There was a lot of – running, Fighting."

"Things blowing up."

Hermione laughed through her tears. "Rocks falling, people dying. That year was full of people dying …" Severus undid his neckcloth, and stretched. "I should like to hear the story, some day."

"Not of your own death –"

"No, not of that, thank you all the same. But I should like to hear more of your life, Hermione. For what I have read, of what you have written, convinces me that I should like to know you …" His dark eyes fixed her in place. "To know you very well indeed …"
A high voice interrupted them. "Are you almost finished?"

Severus wheeled on one foot. "Witch Austen, you have no sense of timing!"

"There's no need to take that tone—"

"There is every need," he shouted. "I am baring my soul, and you are interested in your pocket watch! For the love of all that is holy, five more minutes!"

A rock splashing into Pemberley Pond was the only answer.

Hermione had thought, frantically, and bit her lip as she said, "Severus – I can't possibly stay here –"

He hissed between clenched teeth. "And it comes down to Slytherin machinations in the end; why am I not surprised?"

"Excuse me?"

He stepped close to her – too close – eep! – and held up the crystal. How had he gotten that? – "Jane Austen desires a tutor in magic."

Hermione blinked, cautiously. "… Yes?"

"She guards the entrances and exits to this novel, one of the choice fruits of her mind. And she has shown herself cheerfully capable of manipulation, extortion, and illicit reading of correspondence."

"Yes?"

"So, for the love of Merlin, woman – cut a deal with her! She would be more than willing, I am sure, to have a governess of such indisputable brilliance. Pop by to tutor her in magic, bit by bit – and come and see me, talk to me –" Severus grabbed her shoulders, and before Hermione knew it, her face was squashed against his waistcoat – "love me!"

"Mphmgh –" she tried.

"Hermione …" He eased her back, leaned in, and – oh my god oh yes please please please – hurrah! – did his best to kiss her senseless.

When they both came up for air, Severus concluded, with: "Love me – for – I love you."

"Oh," Hermione started, but he interrupted. His eyes were sparkling with excitement. "This possibility cannot go unexplored, Hermione. You, with your acumen, your witchcraft, and your passion for discovery. It need not be for long periods of time – for were it forever, you would throw your own world out of joint … but you could have a refuge here. If you wish it. Magic tutor to Witch Austen, and lover of the last living fragment of my soul …"

Hermione felt enchanted. "Where would we go?"

"Lyme Regis, I think," Severus said. "Louisa Musgrove will need draughts."

Then Jane piped up from behind his back. "Although Jane Fairfax does require an apothecary, too."
"Damn you, woman. I am a mere apothecary's assistant! And you're ruining my romantic moment!"

"Nonsense: I am acting as a chaperone. And I could make you an apothecary with the flick of a pen!"

Hermione had to laugh at the expression on Severus' face. "Best listen to her, my good man – who knows what she might do instead!"

Then Jane turned to her, smiling sweetly. "Don't patronize me, my dear." She tilted her head. "Or, on second thought: do. Yes: do – stay in your little life, and know that if you don't want this most eligible – soul fragment? La, what heresy. Anyway, if you don't want him, I shall have him, for my very own."

Severus only had a brief moment to look panicked, for Hermione grabbed him, and held him close. She did not growl, "MINE," or give him a proprietary lick, but it was a close thing.

Jane let off a peal of laughter. "That did it! You shall tutor me, Miss Granger, and what a time we shall have!" She held out a hand. "Shake on it, shall we? I have drawn up a room for you, attached to my parlor, and I have ordered several gowns that would be most suitable."


Jane looked arch. "Perhaps?"

Severus groaned. "Damn it. It must be the air here. Or the mutton. I'm losing my edge – I should have seen the trap –"

"Nonsense, it's not a trap." Hermione smiled. "It's a request. Is it not, Miss Austen?"

"Witch Austen, and yes. For I might need your help again …" And Jane, looking smug, pulled one last thing out of her reticule. It was blue, tooled in gold, and –

Unspeakable Granger's fingers twitched. "Is that …"

"The Bath Book?" Jane smirked. "Yes. And if you come to tutor me, I shall read it aloud to you, over tea."

"And that's why Charles Musgrave is still roaming free …" Severus breathed.

"And that is an acceptable proposal, Jane Austen – we have a deal." Hermione extended a hand. "Shake on it?"

Jane grinned, and shook her hand most heartily. "Now you –" she waggled her fingers at them both. "Confirm your compact however you see fit."

"Witch," Severus growled, and, "You're getting a promotion out of it!" Hermione replied, beaming.

"O," Jane fluttered a hand over her tucker. "O, such impropriety. I turn my back on you, messieur, mam'selle – I turn my back on you both."

She turned her back – and Severus and Hermione embraced most passionately – and the sun rose brightly, light shone brilliantly, and the shades of Pemberley finally took a hint and scarpered.
In Which There Is an Ending

The exact details of the compact took a few more weeks to iron out, with the result that Unspeakable Hermione Granger (as Miss Mary Bennet) saw her sister Eliza return safely home from Hunsford and Rosings. It also gave her the opportunity to say what she had always longed to say to Lydia, in a grave voice:

"Far be it from me, my dear sister, to depreciate such pleasure. They would doubtless be congenial with the generality of female minds. But I confess they would have no charms for me. I should infinitely prefer a book."

But of this answer Lydia heard not a word. She seldom listened to any body for more than half a minute, and never attended to Mary at all. And it was just as well she had no attention, in this case, or she would have heard Hermione add (in a dulcet undertone), "I sincerely hope Wickham has the French pox."

One sunny afternoon in June of that year, though, after a lovely outing in Derbyshire with her governess, and her governess' gentleman caller, Witch Austen returned Miss Mary Bennet to her room with no loss of time.

Miss Mary sat down to her instrument and began to practice, with a mind to thorough base and human nature, and no knowledge of magic, of errant apothecaries' assistants, or of Rocks Falling and Everyone Dying - unless, with regard to the last, one took into account Pliny on Pompeii.

Lest this insensibility seem strange, it should be mentioned that Witch Austen also returned Hermione Granger, with no loss of time, to Hogwarts Library that day. Unspeakable Granger had found Emma, plump and smug from Longbourn kitchen leavings, stretched out on the pianoforte seat and purring in a beam of sunlight. Emma departed "Pride and Prejudice" with Miss Granger, and greatly enjoyed her subsequent place on a cushion at her mistress' feet, next to a resigned Crookshanks, while that same mistress finished that same book.

For that is exactly what Unspeakable Granger did. Fact: as she read, further marginalia appeared. Further fact: though most of these notes were sly observations on the plot, a few were somewhat more personal.

And a few of those were enough to make her blush most sincerely in private, and enough to make her declare in public (or at least to Madam Pince) that the volume concerned was an Article of Unspeakable Interest, and must be retained (by Unspeakable Granger) for further research.

None knew the true extent of that research, as the book was kept under lock and key, behind warp and ward, in a hidden compartment of Unspeakable Granger's office. For if a thousand years in some courts is like a day that has past, then surely a thousand days in a certain Witch Austen's court passed as a minute or two –

– and surely the two concerned in our tale (Mr. Severus Granger, Apothecary, Lyme Regis, m. Miss Mary H. Bennet, spinster, late of Longbourn, Herts. ) lived out these days – and a thousand and one nights – and surely many more – in the greatest and most sincere connubial felicity.

A Rose by any other name would be as sweet, and That Bath Book had indeed the most amazing plot that Hermione had ever heard read – these two truths would be universally acknowledged, were they known to more than a few key parties concerned.
But we readers, even with our unreliable narrators and our fractured narratives … we know that this third truth, a universally (and alternate universally) acknowledged truth … this truth is both the charm and the end: that the Unspeakable and the Apothecary's Assistant did indeed live happily ever after – and that they were both ever sensible of the warmest gratitude towards the Author who, by dragging Hermione into "Pride and Prejudice," had been the means of uniting them.

THE END

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