

Passion for the Cause

by dream_labyrinth

To catch a killer, Hermione needs to learn how to spy. Who else but a Slytherin should she ask? But Lucius might have more to teach her, and Severus might not be as dead as she thought.

Written for the Livejournal SS/HG exchange

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 3

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Chapter 1

Hermione stared at the parchment without seeing it. The calculations were flawless; she had had no difficulties in discovering the pattern in the five cases of burglary. All that was left now was to send her findings to her boss and let somebody else do the actual catching of the criminal yet again.

She picked up her quill and toyed with the idea of switching a few numbers, just enough to give the impression that the cases were not connected. Then Wanker would be led on the wrong track and she could maybe do some investigating of her own.

With a sigh, Hermione dropped the quill again. It was no good. As little as she liked never getting to do anything but paperwork, she knew she would never risk a continuing series of crimes just to make Wanker look bad.

She folded the parchment into a neat paper plane, used the spell to turn it into one of those annoying flying in-house memos and directed it to her boss.

The paper plane fluttered angrily but didn't take off.

Frowning, Hermione looked closer and realised she had actually addressed the missive to "Wanker". Even though the nickname was appropriate, there was no denying that his name was in fact "van Crewe". A quick spell corrected the error and the memo flew off.

Clearing up her desk, Hermione grinned. Ron and Harry would get a good laugh out of this.

Then her face fell. It would probably take another month until she would meet the others again. Harry and Ginny were in some undisclosed location training the English Quidditch team for the upcoming World Cup. And Ron not only preferred not to meet her without the other two for moral support, he also was on a field trip in Bulgaria with Viktor and a bunch of young and hopeful Auror aspirants, training them in the fine arts of stealth, tracking and survival.

As she left the Ministry, Hermione considered going to the pub, but it was no fun to drink alone, and the only company she'd find was any number of fellow Hogwarts students who'd say mean, hurtful things like "you're here alone, are you?"

Instead, she wandered home to the Muggle flat to simultaneously watch the news and read the *Prophet*.

Neither offered much in terms of entertainment. There had been yet another killing the tenth, Rita Skeeter noted in her scathing editorial of a pureblood, an unknown white male of about forty years, as the Muggle news reported. Hermione listened to some policeman saying that there was no link between this murder and the previous ones and that those crimes, even though the police had set up a special investigation group and was working closely with Scotland Yard, remained unsolved. At the same time, she smirked at Rita's apparently different information, for she certainly mentioned links between the cases. Not only had all victims been purebloods, they were also all killed in the same area of Muggle London, where the only Wizarding institution was the office of the ominous Society for the Promotion of Blood Diversity. Was Magical Law Enforcement, Rita asked, too blind to see that obviously a Muggle-born or half-blood was taking revenge on the purebloods for their support of the one once known as You-Know-Who?

Hermione snorted. If they were to follow Rita's logic, Magical Law Enforcement would have to arrest anybody who'd ever been in that particular part of the town. She certainly did a good job with stirring panic in the Wizarding population for nothing. But to bring up the blood issue that everyone was working so hard to overcome was simply disgusting. The last thing they needed was for the purebloods to fire hexes left, right and centre at any Muggle-born or half-blood who looked at them. The Wizarding world had just overcome what had been perilously close to a civil war. The Battle of Hogwarts, as the *Prophet* had dubbed it, was only three years past. And here they were, risking another conflict over the exact same silly idea.

On one account Rita was right, though. Magical Law Enforcement as a whole did do little to find the murderer. This task had been assigned to that office which had since its creation three years ago worked tirelessly to find escaped Death Eaters, an office which the Minister himself had created and called, to show that it was the be-all and end-all, Omega Office.

Robert Delancey, who preferred to be known by his last name only, was, in his opinion, the future of Magical Law Enforcement. As a child, he had devoured adventure novels, later had read everything he could get his hands on about secret services and the military. If he had been a Muggle, he would likely have joined the army. As a wizard, he wore robes that had a subdued camouflage pattern, and in his flat one room was full of well-used sporting equipment.

He had, in his first year at Hogwarts, decided to become an Auror. He had worked hard to receive the necessary O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s and had passed the required tests with flying colours. His coach was a bit worried about Delancey's enthusiasm when it came to using violence, and had suggested to his superiors that Delancey should never be allowed to deal with suspects alone.

This gentleman would undoubtedly have been shocked, had he lived to see it, that after the fall of Lord Voldemort Robert Delancey was handpicked by the new Minister of Magic as the head of the newly established Omega Office. It had taken Kingsley Shacklebolt no more than a year to decide that he'd rather be anything else but Minister, and he had gladly resigned the position as soon as he could. Gawain Robards, who succeeded him, firmly believed that what the Ministry and especially law enforcement needed was a firm hand not bound by all those regulations restricting the Aurors.

For Delancey, this was a dream come true. Unlike the Aurors, the members of the Omega Office were not so limited by rules that, in Delancey's opinion, just made things easy for the criminals. As an Auror, he only had been able to use a few threats that never scared anyone. In the Omega Office, the first goal was to obtain information and confessions, and nobody particularly cared by what means this goal was reached.

In Delancey's mind, a wizard in league with Lord Voldemort had forfeited his rights anyway, so this development fitted his world view perfectly. He was of the opinion that the Old Testament had had it right with the "eye for an eye" business, and that successful crime prevention required a certain bending of rules, as long as the bending was done on the right side, by the right people namely, his side and his people.

He had handpicked the members of the Office and had created a good mix of thugs who'd follow orders without wasting too much time with thinking for themselves and people who'd not get a headache from using their brains. He had made contact with people who could provide valuable information, and he had, last but not least, created a certain reputation for his office, which meant that if a person wearing the bright blue omega badge on the robe approached a civilian, that civilian was likely to cooperate without much further encouragement.

Robert Delancey enjoyed his job, and he was good at it. The Minister, even though he sometimes was a little uneasy, on the whole congratulated himself on his creation. As long as Delancey was on his side, he would prevent any Dark Lord from rising, and that was, after all, all that mattered.

When the Minister realised that the problem of the so called pureblood Ripper would not go away, and that Rita did not let up in her demands on him, he decided to involve the most effective institution of law enforcement he could think of. He sent an in-house memo to Robert Delancey asking him for an interview.

Others might face their boss with quivering knees; Delancey was calm. After all, he did a very good job. Most known and a large number of suspected Death Eaters were either in Azkaban or in other forms of confinement. He had collected information about all those he privately suspected without having the limited amount of proof required for an investigation of the Omega Office. And if necessary, he could always fall back to his file on Gawain Robards, which provided an interesting array of facts the public undoubtedly would die to know. Therefore, he went into the Minister's office without qualms and sat down nonchalantly without being asked.

The Minister seemed a little flustered by this ease, but didn't comment. Instead, he picked up a thick wad of paper and handed it to Delancey.

"I have a new task I would like you to do for me," he said.

Delancey pulled up an eyebrow as he browsed through the documents. "The pureblood Ripper? Do you expect him to be a Death Eater?"

Robards frowned. "I don't care what he is," he snapped. "I just want him off the street."

Delancey, privately translating this to "I want Rita Skeeter off my back", looked down to hide the gleam in his eyes. This could be an exciting new task now that hunting down Death Eaters was facing an end. But it was no good to let the Minister know, he might reconsider the usefulness of the Omega Office if he stopped to think that once all Death Eaters were caught, there was no need to have a group of people dedicated to that job. "Our task is to find Death Eaters, not to do the Aurors' job," he said.

"Your task is whatever I assign you!"

Delancey straightened. "I believe that the Ministry is not, in fact, the same as the Minister. Most institutions are more permanent than a single person. Wouldn't you agree and the public as well that we don't want Law Enforcement to be in the hands of the Minister?"

Robards' face was pale, but he looked more angry than intimidated. "You would not dare to threaten me, Delancey, would you?"

Delancey met his glare coolly. "Would there be anything to threaten you with, Minister?" he asked back.

Robards narrowed his eyes, but didn't reply. After a moment he gestured towards the stack of papers. "Do what you can, Delancey. Ask one of the Arithmancers to help you, maybe they can come up with some sort of pattern, some connection." He sighed. Delancey thought he looked very old and weak. "Just find this man, Delancey. Whatever it takes."

On his way back to his office, Delancey browsed through the material. The largest part was made up by Rita Skeeter's articles. Then there were the Auror reports of their findings, which was little enough. All ten victims had been male and pureblood, but that was the only thing they had in common. One had owned a shop in Diagon Alley, another had worked for the Ministry, another had been employed by a French potions business and yet another had worked as a freelance designer. They covered an age range of 25 to 113. Delancey knew none of them, which to him was a sure sign that they had not been involved with the Death Eaters. In his opinion, this blew Skeeter's theory of a Muggle-born or half-blood taking revenge, because why should anybody take revenge on somebody who hadn't been involved in the first place? It was much more likely that a pureblood was killing off his own people, maybe targeting anyone who hadn't openly supported Voldemort. It seemed just the thing those bastards would

do.

But one thing was clear: the material provided didn't give him any decent leads to the killer. Skeeter's theory of the Society for the Promotion of Blood Diversity might be worth a check, but he doubted it would yield anything. Robards had suggested an Arithmancer. Delancey didn't think that sitting in an office making calculations did anything to catch criminals, but it was better than nothing and at least it would give the Minister the feeling he was being followed. So he backtracked to the elevator and paid a visit to Patrick van Crewe, the head of the Arithmancers in Magical Law Enforcement.

Entering the man's office, Delancey frowned. As far as he knew, van Crewe was married, which raised the question what sort of woman would marry a man like him. He was pudgy, with a receding hairline, thick pink fingers and a badly fitting suit in a horrible shade of puce. Delancey didn't bother to hide the distasteful curling of his lips. People like van Crewe usually were too arrogant to notice that they were disliked.

People like van Crewe also knew very well that it didn't bode well for their future if the head of the Omega Office wandered through their doors. The balding man jumped up and gestured for Delancey to sit down. "Mr. Delancey, it is a pleasure to see you. What can I do for you? Would you like a cup of tea? The weather is horrible, isn't it? It's been raining for days and Magical Maintenance certainly doesn't go out of their way to cheer us up." He gestured to the window behind his desk, which showed a patch of dark, cloudy sky through a mist of heavy rain.

Delancey didn't join in his fake laugh, and moments later van Crewe fell silent. For a while, Delancey let him move uncomfortably in his chair, watching him with a sardonic grin. Then he smiled pleasantly, which had the effect of making his vis-à-vis pale. "I hope you will be able to help me, van Crewe. I have a little problem for which I would need the help of a qualified Arithmancer."

Van Crewe's eyes lit up. Undoubtedly he was happy to hear that it was nothing more complicated. "Certainly! May I ask what the problem is?"

Delancey's smile widened. "You will understand that the work of the Omega Office requires secrecy."

As Delancey had known he would, van Crewe fell back in his chair. "Of course, of course. Well, in this case, I will give you my best Arithmancer. She will be able to assist you even with the most complicated cases." He browsed through the paperwork on his desk in a failed attempt to look busy and important. "Miss Granger has just finished a job, so she will be free to join your team immediately."

Delancey's eyes narrowed as he mentally went through the list of employees in the Arithmancers' Office. "Miss Hermione Granger? Potter's friend?"

Van Crewe made a face. "That's the one."

Of course, Delancey had heard of Granger. In fact, he knew even more than most, as he had much better sources at his hands. He knew that Granger had finished Hogwarts after the fall of Voldemort and had then come to work in the Arithmancers' Office. She had been involved in several cases, but mostly it hadn't been her name in the reports and two years after she had started she still had the same position. It was common knowledge that van Crewe didn't trust her and doubted her abilities, even though she could probably calculate the likelihood of van Crewe ever solving a calculation with the help of a textbook and three Arithmancers in the time it took her boss to read the specifications. Van Crewe likely considered this his chance to kill two birds with one stone: satisfy the demands of the Omega Office and give Granger an unsavoury task. Delancey didn't care. The Minister would be happy to tell the press that such a distinguished person was on the job and while everybody was looking at Granger, he would be able to pull some strings and find this killer.

"That will be perfect," he said to van Crewe. "Send her up to my office tomorrow and I will give her the necessary information." He stood up to leave and smirked at van Crewe's obvious relief. In the door, he turned back. "If there is anything else I need, I'll get in touch." The expression on the other man's face made him snicker all the way to the elevator.

Hermione looked up with a frown when she heard her office door open. She had just been writing a letter to Ginny, as there had been no new tasks waiting for her in the morning, and felt a bit guilty for that, but mostly she was annoyed at somebody entering her office without being invited to do so.

"Can't you knock?" she snapped before the identity of the person before her registered. Then she added a belated and no friendlier "sir".

Van Crewe's eyes shot daggers at her. "Miss Granger, this is not the tone you should use to your superior if you ever intend to be promoted in this office."

Hermione dropped her quill. She hadn't slept well, she was bored at work and she had no patience to deal with Wanker today. "At the moment, sir, the position I would qualify for is occupied anyway, so there's little point in me being polite until you retire, is there?"

His face turned dangerously red and she pressed her lips together tightly. It was stupid to make him angry, he hated her enough already. For a moment, she considered an apology, but simply couldn't get herself to speak the words.

He relieved her of the necessity to say anything. "I have assigned you to the Omega Office for the time being. You will report to Mr. Delancey immediately," he said curtly.

Hermione's eyes widened. She had heard enough of the Omega Office to distrust it, and even though she had never met him, Robert Delancey wasn't on her list of people she'd like to work with. From what she had gathered from the Ministry gossip, he sounded just like the kind of person who shouldn't have any power at all, much less as much as he had as the head of the Omega Office.

"Is there anything wrong with your hearing, Miss Granger? I said immediately," van Crewe sneered, obviously pleased at her look of shock.

Hermione took a deep breath. "Of course, sir," she replied. "I will get in touch with Mr. Delancey right away."

He nodded curtly. "Let him give you a desk in his office. There will be no need for you to come back here tomorrow."

As she watched him leave, Hermione wondered whether this meant she wouldn't come back to this office at all. But then again, it wasn't the Wanker alone who decided on her future. And maybe this assignment might finally get her the attention of somebody more interested in having employees who knew what they were doing.

Quickly, she gathered her quill and notepad and made her way to the elevator.

In front of the door with the blue omega she hesitated, took a deep breath and squared her shoulders before knocking.

"Enter," a cool voice said.

She opened the door and found herself in an office unlike any she had seen before in the Ministry. There were no cubicles like in the Aurors' Office. Instead, Mr. Delancey had arranged the desks in groups of two, facing each other, with his own at the end of the room facing the door. There were no walls to separate the desks; apparently everybody inside this office was to be trusted with everything anybody else did. The desks were cluttered with paperwork, but only a few chairs were occupied. As Hermione slowly walked towards Delancey's desk, she suddenly realised why the room seemed so familiar despite being completely out of place in the Ministry. It reminded her a little of American police stations you sometimes saw on TV or in movies. She could easily imagine a pair of investigators putting their heads together over some piece of evidence, making marks on one of the blackboards apparently, the Ministry hadn't managed to acquire those fancy plexiglass boards she'd seen in some programmes.

The clash of American detective story with British Wizarding Ministry Office made her grin and relax slightly. But when she reached the desk at the far end of the aisle, her grin faded into an incredulous look. This couldn't be the infamous Robert Delancey! The man was wearing camouflage robes. It was absolutely impossible a person in camouflage robes could instil anything but the urge to laugh in anybody.

But then Robert Delancey looked up and she found that despite the ridiculous outfit, there was something in his eyes and the cool smile that made her shiver.

"So you managed to find your way to us, Granger," he said. "We usually start work precisely at seven o'clock; it would help if you could be on time tomorrow."

Hermione felt herself blush. "I only just heard that you had asked for my help, Mr. Delancey. And might I say that in most departments work doesn't start until eight at the earliest?"

"We're not most departments, as you will know." Mr. Delancey picked up a file and handed it to her. "The Minister apparently thinks an Arithmancer will be of any help with this. You can take the desk by the door. I expect some results for the meeting at eight tonight."

She stared at him without moving. She didn't mind working overtime, but was he really expecting her to stay here until eight?

"Well?" he asked, still holding the file.

Reluctantly, Hermione took it, feeling that instead of accepting work, she should turn and run while she still could.

"I don't know how long you will take, Granger, but I suggest you stop gaping and get to work. If you have any questions, ask one of the others. I have some meetings to attend to." With that, her temporary boss stood up and walked past her without another glance.

She stood where he had left her, trying to make sense of this. He hadn't even bothered to explain what he wanted her to do. And the file in her hands was enormous, she would be lucky if she had read it by tonight. There was no chance she would have anything to present at a meeting so soon.

As Hermione opened the file to find out what her task was about, a stack of loose papers fell out and scattered on the floor. With a soft curse, she tried to pick them up in the order in which she guessed them to have been before.

"Don't bother, they weren't actually sorted," a voice said.

From her position on the floor, Hermione could only see a pair of sneakers and blue jeans under plain, dark blue robes. Then the owner of the voice squatted next to her and shoved some of the papers back into the file in her hand.

"He ran right over you, didn't he? Don't worry, he does that to everybody. But once you get used to him, it's actually not bad to work here. And if you need anything, just ask me, I'll be glad to help."

"Thanks," Hermione said as she got up. "I'm Hermione Granger."

"I know. I'm Stephen Bradley." He grinned. "I don't think you remember me. I played Quidditch for Ravenclaw, but you weren't much of a fan, were you?"

She smiled. "Not really. I just went to watch Harry and Ron play. I think it's pretty silly to spend so much time on a broomstick." She stopped and bit her lip. "Oh, I'm sorry; I didn't mean to say..."

Stephen laughed. "I just played because I liked flying. I can imagine better things to do with my free time than getting hit by a Bludger."

Together, they walked to an empty desk right next to the door.

"This is the desk Delancey wants you to use. Has he told you what you're supposed to work on?"

"Not really," Hermione replied. "I hope there will be enough in here to help me find that out." She dropped the file on the desk.

"Probably not," Stephen said. "There's precious little to work with or Delancey wouldn't even have considered asking for outside help. We at the Omega Office like to get things done alone." There was a note of pride in his voice. "And we're very successful, too. Just last week we managed to find enough evidence against Goyle to finally land him in Azkaban."

"I've read about it," Hermione said slowly. The evidence had come from rather shady sources and some of it had appeared so much out of the blue that Luna's editorial in *The Quibbler* had suspected forgery. It wasn't that Hermione wasn't glad Goyle got the punishment he deserved, but she would have preferred if there was no shadow of doubt that he indeed deserved it.

Stephen apparently noticed her hesitancy. He was silent for a moment, then coughed and continued cheerily. "We're working on the pureblood murder cases. The Minister feels that as the Aurors are not making progress, somebody with more experience in difficult cases should try their hand. Delancey has assigned some of our best investigators to the job, but we don't have a skilled Arithmancer on the team. I'm the only Ravenclaw, so usually that sort of thing is my job, but I'm better with letters than with numbers. Give me ancient runes anytime."

Hermione smiled a little. "Ancient runes was fun to learn," she said, her mind already collecting all the information she had picked up over the last months on the murder series.

"Anyway, all we have at the moment are the Auror reports, some unreliable witnesses and Skeeter's rubbish. I don't think you'll be able to make much of it."

"But Mr. Delancey said he wanted a report by tonight!"

Stephen laughed. "Tell him you're busily working on the problem and have already pinned down some variables or something. Make it sound professional and keep it brief and promise more tomorrow. Oh, and don't call him Mister. We're all on last name only here."

Hermione frowned. "I noticed he called me Granger," she said.

"Don't like it? You better get used to it. It's nicer than always saying Mister this and Ms that, I think."

"It makes me feel like I'm back in Hogwarts and talking to Draco Malfoy and his gang. They were the only ones who always called us by our last names."

"In that case, call me Stephen," he replied. "But don't try that with Delancey."

"I'll keep it in mind, thanks," Hermione said, sitting down and arranging her quill and notebook in front of her.

"I'll leave you to your work then, Hermione," Stephen said and wandered back to his desk. Hermione noticed he glanced back and gave her an encouraging nod.

With a sigh, she opened the file again and began sorting the documents.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 3

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Chapter 2

Delancey's foot tapped her desk in a steady, annoying rhythm as he leaned closer with a menacing expression. "It's been two weeks, and still this is all you have?"

Hermione looked up from her calculations with an exasperated sigh. "I can't give you anything more unless I have more information. I can't find links between the victims, your raid of the office of that society hasn't yielded anything useful—"

"At least my people try to find out something, Granger. All you do is sit inside this office all day scribbling numbers." He pulled a piece of parchment from the mess on her desk. "And not even that. All you have is variables."

"Of course that is all I have," Hermione snapped. "If there is nothing definite to work with, how could I have any numbers – or results?"

"Your boss said you're the best in your field, surely you can come up with something."

"I prefer not to come up with something but to actually calculate," she replied peevishly. She knew she was hitting a sore spot. Only a few days ago, the *Prophet* had published a scathing article about the falsified evidence that had been discovered in the Goyle case.

Delancey pressed his lips together. "Then do calculate, Granger. I want results. Or do you want me to tell the Minister that you're just a waste of money and time?"

Hermione dropped her quill. "Tell the Minister whatever you want, *Mister* Delancey. Just let me do my work."

He snorted. "You call that work, do you? Never getting your hands dirty, always staying where it's nice and warm – you couldn't do real work, fieldwork, if your life depended on it."

"For your information, I've done quite a bit of getting my hands dirty while fighting Voldemort—"

"Of course you had to drag that old story in again. I'm sure it's comfortable to rest on those laurels, but keep in mind they're getting dry and dusty, Granger. You can't expect us to be hero worshipping forever."

"I don't expect hero worshipping!" she cried, but Delancey had already left the office.

"Don't let him get you down, Hermione." Stephen came to her side. "He's just annoyed we're not making much progress."

Hermione snorted. "We're not making any progress, the way I see it." She dropped down into her chair and put her hands over her eyes. Two weeks of working at least twelve hours a day were taking their toll. She was tired, her brain felt muggy, her eyes burnt and she couldn't remember the last proper meal she'd had."

"Tell you what, why don't we go to the Leaky and have some dinner?" Stephen said. "You've been working much too hard on this, you need a break."

She groaned. "Sorry, but I really don't feel like eating out, Stephen. I'll just go home and get some sleep. At least tomorrow's Sunday. I'm definitely not coming in to work, no matter what he says."

"I'll tell him you're sick," Stephen offered. "Sure you don't want to grab a bite first?"

"Very sure, but thanks for the offer. And don't tell him anything. He can't actually demand us to work on Sundays, you know." Hermione picked up her jacket. "I'll see you on Monday, then."

"I hope you'll feel better soon," Stephen called after her as she walked to the elevator.

Lying in the bath, feeling the warm water soothe her body, Hermione let her thoughts wander. So Delancey thought she was not doing enough, did he? He thought she preferred to stay out of harm's way. Bastard! What did he expect her to do? She didn't have Auror training, she was an Arithmancer. It was her job to stay in the office and "scribble numbers". His famed Omega Office had failed, that was it. Instead of trying to gather information, they had barged into the office of that Society for the Promotion of Blood Diversity like a troll crashing a party and hadn't found anything. What had Delancey expected, a list of victims? A to-do list: *Monday – shopping, Tuesday – dinner at Aunt Marge's, Wednesday – commit brutal murder?* He was an idiot. He thought that his intimidation tactics would work on everybody. If anybody had asked her, she would have suggested getting a spy inside the organisation. There might not be written records, but a spy could easily pick something up in a meeting. But of course Delancey was too dumb to see that. He probably was a Hufflepuff, he had that dogged determination. But for spying, it took something else.

She felt the water cool off and used a heating and a stasis charm to keep it at a comfortable temperature.

Professor Snape had been a great spy. Voldemort hadn't found him out, not even at the very end. But that society was no Dark Lord. It wouldn't take a talent like Professor Snape's to fool them. She could probably do it herself. That would teach Delancey a lesson!

Hermione laughed. What a silly idea! She had no idea how to be a spy. How did you get people to talk about the thing you were interested in, anyway? She might spend weeks infiltrating the place and learn nothing more than the members' favourite Quidditch team.

But maybe she could bring up the thought at the next meeting. Maybe Delancey had people for this sort of thing. Not that he'd listen to her. He never did.

By the time Hermione left the bathroom, the skin on her fingers and feet had become crinkly and soft, and she felt more relaxed than she had in weeks. She crawled into bed and read a bit to take her mind off work, before falling asleep at an hour she usually would have considered ridiculously early.

Hermione woke the next morning feeling wide awake and energetic. She had a hearty breakfast, even made some scrambled eggs to eat with her toast. It was a huge difference to her usual breakfast of a cup of lukewarm tea or a cold coffee from the shop near the subway station.

Afterwards, she cleaned her flat, enjoying the feeling of doing something that didn't require her to use her brain and had visible results.

The *Sunday Prophet* put a damper on her good mood. There had been yet another killing.

With a sigh, she fell onto the nearest chair. Delancey would go crazy. If she didn't show up at work, he'd probably send a commando to pick her up. As if this murder would bring any new evidence! So far, the well-worn line that every criminal made a mistake sooner or later had not proven true with this one.

She browsed the article. There was nothing in it that she didn't already know from the other cases. Male Pureblood, body terribly mangled, found in the general area of that

Society for the Promotion of Blood Diversity – though Rita Skeeter might just have put that bit in to prove her point. The way Hermione saw it, there was no reason to believe the killer was a Muggleborn taking revenge on Purebloods. If he was, he chose his victims badly, as most of them had not been openly on Voldemort's side in the war.

Hermione trudged into her bedroom to change into some decent clothes. There was no way of avoiding it; Delancey would expect her at the office immediately. She decided to Apparate, at least that way she'd be there and – hopefully – gone quickly.

As she had anticipated, most members of the Omega Office were already assembled in the conference room when she arrived. Delancey had been pointing out details of the new case, but interrupted his speech when Hermione entered.

"How nice of you to have fitted us into your busy social schedule, Granger," he said with a sneer.

There were some snickers. Stephen shot her an encouraging look.

"Now if you're ready, I'd like to continue."

Hermione slid into the nearest empty chair, opened her notebook and tried to listen intently.

"As I was saying before Granger made her grand entrance, there are a large number of similarities between this case and the last ten. However, Skeeter has published just about every detail we had on those, so we can't rule out the possibility of a copycat killer."

A middle-aged woman in black robes looked up from her notes. "With eleven murders and no lead, shouldn't we for the time being consider this to be one and the same criminal? If we start looking for copycats, we'll get bogged down completely."

Delancey frowned. "We shouldn't rule out any option at the moment, Rogers. Precisely because we have no lead we need to be open for all possibilities."

"Have there been any witnesses this time?" Stephen asked.

Delancey made a dismissive gesture. "One woman claims to have seen a man the size of Frankenstein's monster lurking in the shadows, but I don't set much store by that. They always see sinister figures when there's been a murder."

The woman he'd called Rogers browsed through her notes. "The forensic expertise suggests the killer of victims 4, 7 and 10 was taller than the victims, whereas in cases 3, 6, 8 and 9 he or she was shorter. With the others, it was impossible to tell due to the many wounds. That would mean our suspect is somewhere between 5'5" and 5'11".

"Yes, but doesn't reduce the number of suspects much, does it?" another man said. "The wounds were all non-magical, and there is little to no sign that the victims tried to fight, but that might just be because the first blow was lethal. Forensics haven't been able to define which wound resulted in death in all cases, and they couldn't make a model of the weapon used, the edges of the wounds were not clear enough. It looks like the killer used a sharp weapon and a blunt one on all victims. But he or she doesn't necessarily have to be very strong. Victim 9, especially, was very athletic, but again, there's no sign of defence. It seems the murderer got very close without causing suspicion. As all the victims have been male, I'd say we're looking for a woman."

Rogers laughed. "With your theory, we should consider the sexual orientation of the victims. If one of them was gay, he might have let a man much closer than a woman."

"That would be interesting if the victims had been out with somebody before the murders, but that's not the case. It is not unusual for somebody to come up close on the street; the killer might have pretended to be begging," Delancey said. "But keep those ideas in mind." He turned to Hermione. "Now I wonder whether our little Arithmancer has something useful to say."

Hermione blushed angrily. He had no problem talking sensibly to the other members of the team; it was only when dealing with her that he became a jerk. "What do you expect me to have? There is not one bit of new information for me to use," she snapped.

He sneered. "I really wonder why the Minister insisted to take you on the team. You're not of much use, are you?"

Hermione slapped her notebook shut. "In that case, I might as well go home and enjoy the rest of my Sunday."

Without another look back, she stormed out.

Her living room floor was covered with colour-coded notes. The tea she had made a few hours ago was still standing on the kitchen counter, untouched.

Hermione sat cross-legged in the middle of the mess, her elbows resting on her knees, her mouth pressed against her folded hands. Her middle fingers tapped against the backs of her hands.

Ever since she had come home, she had tried to find something in the notes that she hadn't considered before, something that would help her to make sense of the case.

With a sigh, she drew the calendar nearer on which she had marked the dates of the murders. There was no pattern there. Sometimes over a week passed between two killings, sometimes only a few days.

Only...

She frowned. There was one week each month that was unmarked, the time around the full moon. Could that mean anything?

But what could it mean? Was the killer too weak during that time to murder? Were they looking for a werewolf?

Hermione shook her head. It didn't make sense. If a werewolf took this route to fight for werewolf rights, there were more influential people to kill. The victims were blank pages, politically speaking – unless of course there was something that wasn't in her notes.

With an exasperated sigh she got up. She felt so useless. Eleven killings and nothing to point her in the right direction. Delancey probably was right; it made no sense to involve her.

She pressed her lips together. No! She'd show him. If he didn't want her in the office, she would weasel her way into that Society for the Promotion of Blood Diversity and find the information they needed. If those people had anything to do with the murders, she would find out. Hermione Granger had taken on Voldemort; she wouldn't be outwitted by some serial killer.

Out of the papers on the floor, she picked up the one with the information on the Society. There was a meeting tonight!

With a quick glance at her watch, she changed from her work clothes into jeans and a plain blouse. If they were looking for blood diversity, they would get a Muggleborn par excellence.

Seconds later, Hermione Apparated into a dark alley. With her wand drawn, she cast a quick look around. Nobody had seen her arrive. She hurried out to the main street and checked the house numbers, then turned right.

A small brass plaque told her she was at the correct address. Taking a deep breath, she entered and walked up to the second floor as advised by the plate at the door.

What looked like the door to a regular flat was standing wide open. She could hear voices from the inside, but nobody reacted to her timid knock.

Hesitantly, she went inside.

The hallway was dimly lit and narrow, with doors leading off on both sides. Opposite the entrance door was another open door. Hermione could see people gathered around a table.

"Hello?" she said.

A young man turned. "Oh, hi! Come in. You're new here, aren't you?" He got up and held out a hand. "Don't be shy, we won't bite."

A woman said something that she didn't get, but she heard several people laugh and blushed uncomfortably.

The man cast a glance at somebody out of her sight. "Mum, don't go and scare her away!"

"I'm not scared," Hermione said quickly and stepped closer.

Now she could see that the room was a kitchen, immensely crowded, with a large table and eight chairs occupying most of the space. To the left, there was a window going out to a side street. Next to it, several old teacups were arranged neatly on a shelf. A teakettle was standing below it on the kitchen counter.

"Welcome to the Society for the Promotion of Blood Diversity," the man said. "I'm a Half-Blood. My name's Eric. That is Ellen, Muggleborn, Thomas, Half-Blood, Paul, Pureblood – but we don't hold it against him, Miriam, who is obviously half-giant, my fiancée Melanie, Muggleborn and—"

He was interrupted by the last person in the room, a woman who looked so much like him it could only be his mother. "Melanie, like me, is not only Muggleborn but also a werewolf. I'm Lupa."

"Lupa?" Hermione repeated.

"Her name used to be Christine," Eric said hurriedly.

Lupa shot him a menacing look. "I changed it. There is no need to hide what I am, is there? Lycanthropy is not a disease. Nature gave us teeth, and we're not afraid to show them."

"It wasn't nature, precisely," Melanie muttered. "It was Fenrir Greyback."

Lupa opened her mouth to say something, but Eric interceded. "So, who are you?"

Hermione hesitated. She didn't want them to know who she was. "Er – Hannah," she said.

The others looked at her expectantly.

"I'm Muggleborn," Hermione added.

"Welcome," Eric said. "We're always glad to find we're not the only ones who believe that Wizarding society today needs people from all backgrounds to flourish and grow. We have seen in the past what dangers lie in the separation based on blood status. The Purebloods need us Muggleborns and Half-bloods or they will die out. And only if we work together to stamp out the prejudices that have clouded the judgement of previous generations can we make sure that our children will live together peacefully and no Dark Lord will be able to seduce them to follow him and his poisonous ideology."

He was a good speaker, Hermione thought. A bit too pompous – he reminded her of Percy a little – but he did manage to capture his audience, even these people who likely had heard the speech before.

"I'll be glad to help," she said and sat down on the chair Ellen, a dark-haired girl a few years younger than herself, drew up for her. "So, what have you been doing so far? Any projects you're working on right now?"

Miriam, a large woman with a square jaw and small eyes, put one giant hand on a stack of papers on the table. "At the moment we are planning a leaflet campaign to raise awareness in the population. Ellen and Melanie are also creating posters we want to put up in Diagon Alley, but Mel was just explaining that her computer is acting up and the layout isn't quite ready yet."

Hermione frowned. "That sounds good, but isn't there more we can do? Something that really will get people's attention, something they can't overlook and ignore; a big bang of some kind?"

The group was silent for a moment and Hermione noticed that several smiles had faded.

"Our aim is to raise awareness, Hannah. We don't want to polarise. There is enough to divide the Wizarding world, we don't want to add another issue," Eric said quietly.

"Even though the Ministry thinks we're a bunch of evil monsters," Lupa said hatefully.

Hermione frowned. "The Ministry?"

Ellen nodded. "That Omega Office raided this place only a few weeks ago. Apparently they think we are behind those murders."

Miriam winced. "They came to my place, too. I guess being half-giant, I make the perfect suspect. Everybody assumes I'm a monster anyway."

Melanie put a hand on hers. "Don't say that, Miriam. You're one of the nicest people I know."

Lupa slammed a hand on the table. "I still say we should sue that Delancey person. They had no reason whatsoever to barge in here and tear the place apart. Hannah is right. Leaflets and posters are all nice and good, but we should show them that we are willing to fight for what we believe in."

"We are fighting," Paul said. He was a rather thickset man whose dark eyes were shadowed by massive brows. "With every leaflet, with every person who joins our ranks – he nodded to Hermione – "we know our message is heard. They won't ignore us forever; we just have to keep going. The laws might be even for all, but we want a change in people's minds, and the only way to achieve that is to keep pointing out their prejudices. Some Purebloods have come to realise they are no better than other witches and wizards. We are making progress."

"But so slowly it will take generations," Lupa insisted. "And the blood status issue is not the only thing that needs to be addressed. Werewolves are still treated more like beasts than people. We still haven't got our rightful place in this society; we're still supposed to hide what we are."

"Mum, we know that. And we are working on that as well." Eric turned to Hermione. "We are drafting a letter to send to the Minister calling his attention to the werewolf problem."

"There is no werewolf problem," Lupa snapped. "It is a non-werewolf problem, it is the problem that this society thinks it can ignore a strong, powerful group in its midst."

The Minister will just have some undersecretary send us a noncommittal letter full of promises and nothing will happen.”

“Then we will write another letter,” Paul said calmly. “And another and another, until the Minister gets so fed up with us that he will do what we ask him to do just to make us shut up.” He smiled, and Ellen laughed admiringly.

Lupa shot her a disgusted look. “You underestimate the amount of stuff the Minister or any other wizard is able to ignore. If we don’t make it obvious that we won’t accept the denial of our rights, it is our fault if we don’t get what we are entitled to.”

“Lupa, please,” Melanie said with an embarrassed frown. “I think everybody got your point.”

“No they didn’t,” Lupa said sharply. “Weren’t you denied the position at the Ministry simply because of what you are? Didn’t the Hogwarts governors have you removed from the school when they found out about your lycanthropy?”

Melanie didn’t reply.

After a moment’s silence, Miriam cleared her throat. “Well, I guess we discussed everything on schedule for this meeting. Hannah, why don’t you take home some of our leaflets and get an idea of what we’ve been doing?”

Hermione, who had been taking a good look at each member of the group to make sure she could remember their faces, needed a few seconds to realise it was she Miriam was talking to.

“Sure, I will.” Quickly, she grabbed a few brochures from the stack on the table. “When is your next meeting?”

“We will meet here next Sunday, but if you can make it we would appreciate your help with handing out the leaflets in Diagon Alley on Friday afternoon and Saturday. We want to get as many of the weekend shoppers as possible,” Eric said.

“I’ll see what I can do. My work hours are crazy at the moment, though, so I’m not sure I can make it.”

“Where do you work?” Melanie asked.

Again, Hermione hesitated for a moment. “I’m an Arithmancer. A desk job, nothing special,” she said curtly.

She noticed Melanie was about to ask more questions and quickly picked up her jacket. “I got to run. I need to be in the office early tomorrow or my boss will be ready to kill me.”

As she left, she cursed herself for not having answers ready. She had seen some suspicious looks, especially on Lupa’s face, when she had brushed off the questions so quickly.

There might be a book that could help her, but it would be much easier to learn this spy business directly from somebody who knew how to deceive others. She wasn’t convinced yet that the Society for the Promotion of Blood Diversity really had anything to do with the murders, but she hadn’t liked some of the things Lupa had said, and that one man, Thomas, hadn’t said anything at all.

What she needed was a teacher who knew as much as possible about deception and secrecy. She needed a Slytherin. If only Professor Snape was still alive! The last time she had seen him, in the Shrieking Shack, had made her realise that he indeed was human, not the black bat of the dungeons. If he had survived, she might approach him. He had been a good teacher, all things considered. He had demanded a lot, but there had been very few accidents in his class, even though he had let them make some dangerous potions. And even Neville, who had no hand for it, had done quite well in his Potions O.W.L.

Hermione sighed as she unlocked her door. It was no use pondering what Professor Snape might have taught her. She had to look somewhere else for help. She went through a list of Slytherins she knew. Most of the students in her year had been of the thuggish variety, following Draco Malfoy’s orders. There was no way she could approach Draco. The last days of the war had resulted, a year later, in a severe psychological crisis, and after three attempted suicides, he was now living with a man who was as much guard as nurse in a house in Scotland. But he wasn’t the only Malfoy. There was Lucius Malfoy, after all, who had managed once again to escape imprisonment. He certainly knew how to take in people so they’d believe everything he said.

Before Hermione went into her bedroom, she took a last look at the notes spread out on the living room floor. She had to do something. And there was only one person alive to really help her. She’d have to contact Lucius Malfoy.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 3

Hermione faces Lucius, but with a Malfoy things never go as planned.

Chapter 3

Hermione suppressed a shiver as she walked along the path leading to the mansion. In daylight, the park looked nothing like the dark, menacing place she remembered, but the memory of the last time she had been inside the building ahead added to her nervousness the feeling of anxiety a prey might feel when the hunter is near.

She lifted the heavy silver knocker on the massive door, but before she could knock, the door was opened by an old house elf, whose pronounced stoop made her seem even smaller than she actually was.

“Welcome, Miss Granger,” the house elf piped. “The master asks me to thank you for your visit, but he is currently unavailable. If you could leave a message with me?”

Hermione frowned, then told herself that the mansion undoubtedly was heavily warded against intrusion and that she must have set off a dozen alarms on her way to the door.

“I really need to talk to Mr. Malfoy myself,” she said. “If he is busy at the moment, I don’t mind waiting.”

The house elf shook her head. “That won’t be possible, Miss Granger. The master is leaving tonight.”

"Then maybe you can tell me when he will return?" Hermione persisted. It had taken so much effort to convince herself to come here, she was not going to be turned away now.

The house elf shook her head again, but then stopped, frowned, and said, "Please come in, Miss Granger."

With a triumphant grin, Hermione followed her inside, passing the grand staircase to a door on one side of the hallway, which the elf opened for her.

"Please wait here, Miss Granger, the master will be with you in a moment."

Hermione looked around.

She supposed that this was what in historical novels would be called the morning room. There was a table and some chairs on one side, in front of large windows letting in the sun and providing a stunning view of the park. On the other side of the room there was a sofa and some chairs arranged so that any occupants could comfortably chat with each other over the low table. The floor was covered with a thick oriental carpet she was sure was a Nain, a pattern she particularly liked. The blue curtains by the window and the blue upholstery of the chairs picked up the background colour of the carpet and gave the room a cozy atmosphere.

"This shows a lot more taste than you would have expected from anybody who kept white peacocks", she said to herself with a grin.

"I would have expected you to realise, Miss Granger, that it is highly unlikely that the white peacocks were my idea," a familiar voice said from behind her.

She spun around.

Lucius Malfoy stood in the doorway, impeccably dressed in dark blue robes, setting off his silver-blond hair to perfection. Even though Hermione had chosen her clothes carefully this morning and had considered her own grey robes she usually wore Muggle clothes when not at work, but it had seemed wiser to wear robes when visiting the Malfoys quite alright, she now felt dowdy and at an extreme disadvantage compared to this man.

"You startled me," she stuttered.

"So it seems. But how this is possible I don't know. Weren't you waiting for me?" He came in and gestured towards the couch. "Have a seat, Miss Granger. If I remember correctly, conversations with you are likely to take rather longer than anticipated."

She sat down on the very edge of the sofa, nervously rearranging her robes.

"So to what circumstance do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

Hermione swallowed to wet her suddenly dry throat. What was she doing here? The last time she had met the Malfoys, they had been fighting on opposite sides in a war, and it wasn't as if they had been friends before that.

"Well?" Lucius Malfoy asked expectantly.

"Er thanks for giving me a few minutes of your time, Mr. Malfoy." She tried to recall the list of things to say she had thought up earlier. "I won't keep you very long."

She hesitated, trying to gather her thoughts. He was leaning back nonchalantly in his chair and looking at her with an expression of mild interest, but she was sure that he was silently mocking her.

"How is your wife?" she blurted out, just to say something.

He raised an eyebrow. "The last time I talked to her, which was about two weeks ago, she was fine, thank you. She was planning a holiday in Spain with the gentleman that currently has her favour or at least had at that time."

Hermione frowned. Then she remembered that there had been something in the Prophet a while ago about the Malfoys. If she remembered correctly, Narcissa had left her husband because she considered him responsible for getting the family almost killed in the war.

"Oh," she said. What did you say in a situation like that? There was nothing she could think of. And Mr. Malfoy didn't seem devastated about the fact. Probably just his pride was wounded.

"And how is Draco?"

The expression on his face suddenly became wooden. "He is fine," he said curtly. "But I am sure you didn't decide to visit me this morning to inquire about my family."

Hermione blushed. "Well, no."

"Then what can I do for you? Of course, it is a pleasure to talk to you, but you will understand that I must deal with some business affairs that unfortunately will not wait."

She pressed her lips together. That arrogant, ironic tone made her just as angry as Draco's sneers had done in Hogwarts, but unlike then, she couldn't just stand up and slap Lucius Malfoy in the face. Not if she wanted his help and probably not if she wanted to leave this house in one piece.

"I wanted to ask I mean, there is something..." Her voice trailed off. She took a deep breath and started again. "I would like to ask your help, Mr. Malfoy."

He was critically inspecting the fingernails on his right hand, but looked up at this. "My help, Miss Granger? Surely you can't consider me a likely source of help. What could I possibly do that the famed Golden Trio couldn't do alone or with the assistance of the equally popular Miss Weasley?"

Hermione fidgeted. "Well, in this case, I need some well some information, I'd say, that they don't have. It isn't really information; it's more like a talent, an ability."

"Ability or talent cannot be given to somebody, however. So I don't see at all how I could be of assistance."

"Well, you see, I am working on the case of that serial killer murdering the Purebloods, and we do have something that could be a lead, but to figure it out, we need to spy on a certain group of people. And I don't really know anything about how to spy on people, so I figured a Slytherin could help."

"How flattering," Lucius said tartly. "But how did you pick me as the Slytherin of your choice?"

Hermione felt herself blush again. "I don't know all that many Slytherins, do I? We weren't exactly friends with them at Hogwarts."

"And why did you think I would be willing to help you?" he asked, apparently amused.

She frowned. "Well, he's killing Purebloods, right? So you might even be in danger yourself. So if you help me..."

He held up a hand to stop her. "Not quite, Miss Granger. The gentleman with this rather gruesome habit is not killing Purebloods in general. He is killing male Purebloods yes, I know that this applies to me but all of his victims have another thing in common which you might have overlooked. They were all unimportant Purebloods. No connections, no well-known families, no influence. So, you see, I don't fit into the picture at all. But of course it is flattering that you thought of me as your first choice."

Hermione shot him an angry look. This was just typical! The Malfoys were always too arrogant to see a risk for themselves, and they wouldn't lift a finger if it wasn't for their

own gain.

"What makes you think you were my first choice?" she snapped.

"Wasn't I? How disappointing. But didn't you say you were not acquainted with any er suitable Slytherins?"

"I'd rather have gone to Professor Snape than you, if only he was still alive," Hermione said sharply. "He might have been mean, but at least he had some standards and interests apart from his own well-being."

"And look where it got him," Mr. Malfoy muttered. "So my dear friend Severus managed to gain your favour. I am sure he would be thrilled if he knew."

Hermione snorted. "Yeah right. But it doesn't matter, does it? He's dead." Her voice caught slightly on the last word as she remembered the scene in the Shrieking Shack. She still was angry at herself for not even trying to help him. When they went back hours later to retrieve the body, they had been unable to find it, and she had worried for weeks what the Death Eaters might have done to it if they had realised that he had been a traitor.

"So it appears," Lucius said suavely.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, so it appears? I saw that bloody snake almost bite his head off."

"Certainly," he replied calmly, but with a mocking smile. "Now that your reasoning for coming to me for help is established, why don't you try again to give me a reason to help you?"

She crossed her arms in front of her chest and looked at him closely. Why was he giving her a second chance to convince him? In general, it was a good idea to look a gift horse of a Malfoy's providing in the mouth, but she was completely out of other ideas to learn how to spy and simply didn't have a choice.

"If you don't see a risk for yourself, you could maybe help me just well, just for the fun of it."

"For the fun of it," he repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes. Or to annoy the Ministry, or at least the Omega Office."

"What makes you think I might be inclined to annoy this worthy organisation?" he asked. But there was something in his manner that made Hermione think that she had his interest.

"The Omega Office has been assigned the task of finding the Pureblood Ripper," she explained. "And I have been temporarily transferred to help with some calculations I work in the Arithmancers' Office. And the head of the Omega Office, Robert Delancey, who..."

"I know who Robert Delancey is," Lucius said calmly, but again Hermione thought he was not as unconcerned as he pretended to be.

"So anyway, Delancey apparently doesn't think my help does any good, so I want to prove him otherwise."

"And in what way does this concern me?" Lucius asked.

Hermione shrugged. "Well, considering the way Delancey hunts former Death Eaters, I'm sure you can't be the best of friends."

Lucius leaned back in his chair. "Mr. Delancey has indeed paid me a visit not too long ago which I do admit I resented. His tone was not at all what I am accustomed to hearing from Ministry employees."

"Therefore, you might be interested in annoying him a little."

"I fail to see how doing his job for him would annoy him," Lucius said.

Hermione sighed. "Because he's going to hate the fact that it wasn't him doing it. But there won't be much he could do about it because we're actually helping him solve the case."

"And you expect me to assist with this childish plan?"

She shrugged. "I never claimed to have a sophisticated plan. I just want to catch that killer. You were the one who needed some extra incentives."

For a moment, he studied her carefully. Then he said, "I could probably consider helping you. However, I ask for something more in return than just the annoyance of Robert Delancey."

Hermione eyed him warily. She strongly suspected that she wasn't going to like his terms. But she really had no idea what to offer him. What could a rich, successful businessman who had managed yet again to weasel his way out of prosecution for his actions during the war, possibly need that an underpaid Ministry employee without the least influence could get?

"You are aware that my wife has decided not to continue our marriage," he said calmly. "But I am sure you understand that I still have need for a female companion from time to time. For several reasons that are of no concern to you, I would not like to approach any of the single women in my acquaintance. You, on the other hand..."

Before he could continue, Hermione jumped up. "I can't believe you would even dare suggest something like that!" she cried. "Do you really think I would do that? What sort of person do you take me for?"

He seemed unperturbed by her yelling. "Highly amusing as your insinuation might be, Miss Granger, please do consider the likelihood of it. I know you are generally considered attractive enough and I have even heard people voice their surprise about the fact that you are still single, but you must remember that I am used to different standards."

Hermione blushed. She felt extremely stupid. Of course, for somebody who had been married to Narcissa Malfoy, she wouldn't be interesting. But what else could he have possibly meant?

"My suggestion was for something slightly different," he continued. "As you know, I am required to, from time to time, appear at dinners and official functions, usually hosted by the Minister. It is quite out of the question to go to these events alone. There also are still some rumours that I might not in fact have renounced my misguided allegiance to the one who called himself the Dark Lord. However, if you would consider accompanying me, I am sure the rumours would die down. After all, Hermione Granger, famed friend of the famed Harry Potter, would not be seen in public with a Death Eater, would she?"

Hermione gripped the back of the chair. "And you expect me to do that?" she asked with forced calmness.

"I don't see why you might not, Miss Granger. You are, if the yellow press is to be believed, single, you have asked for my help, and I don't think it is an unreasonable price I am asking. My company is generally valued highly by single females."

She pressed her lips together. Arrogant git!

"I might consider doing it, if I knew whether it would be worth the effort," she replied. "But you weren't the one who managed to trick Lord Voldemort until the end, were

you?"

"I might not have managed to lie to him as effectively as Severus, Miss Granger, but I am the one still living my life."

She took a deep breath. She didn't need him. "If this is all, I'm sorry to have bothered you. There's no need to call the house elf, I'll let myself out."

She stomped towards the door.

When her fingers touched the handle, he called her back. "Miss Granger, there is one more thing."

She turned and looked at him expectantly.

"I would suggest that you study the personals in the Saturday edition of the *Prophet*. You might find the pages edifying."

It took all her effort not to hex him immediately. "Thanks, but I am not that desperate yet. But feel free to post an ad yourself; I am sure any single female is just dying to be your arm candy."

He didn't reply, and after a moment she left the room, nodding curtly to the house elf that came running to open the door for her, and walked through the park to the Apparition point outside the gate.

She should have known it was useless asking a Malfoy for help. Did he really expect her to degrade herself like this, basically sell herself as an escort in exchange for information that might not be of any use anyway?

It wasn't as if he was the master spy. Sure, he had managed to trick the Minister, but most people managed that if they tried hard enough.

And the implication in his last remark as if she needed a man! As if she wasn't very well able to live on her own. Maybe some women fell for this macho behaviour, but she didn't need any of it. And she certainly didn't need Lucius Malfoy.

She was still seething by the time she reached her flat, and the fact that it was in desperate need of cleaning while Malfoy had a house elf to do the work for him didn't improve her temper.

Trying to channel her energy into a more productive outlet, she sifted through all the information she had about the Pureblood Ripper and the Society for the Promotion of Blood Diversity. There was nothing. No hint, nothing that could help her solve the mystery.

She dropped the stack of papers she had been reading and decided to go to bed.