

Touch the Dark

by Dreamy_Dragon

When the Ministry refuses to finance Hermione's research project, the only option she has left is the library at Malfoy Manor. She hasn't met Lucius since the war. What happens when she comes face to face with him again? And what has Snape to do with it all?

One

Chapter 1 of 8

When the Ministry refuses to finance Hermione's research project, the only option she has left is the library at Malfoy Manor. She hasn't met Lucius since the war. What happens when she comes face to face with him again? And what has Snape to do with it all?

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Many thanks to my lovely betas Anogete and Dacian Goddess.

JKR's, not mine.

Hermione Granger jammed her quill down with such force that it broke. 'Oh, bollocks,' she murmured as she hunted through her overflowing desk drawer for a new one. Her look fell on the bright orange memo that still hovered on the brink of her desk. She crumpled it into a ball, took aim and lobbed it toward the paper bin in the corner, missing by a few inches. The paper ball straightened itself out with an undignified crunch and sailed right back onto her desk. Hermione huffed. 'Really.'

Susan, who shared the miniscule cubicle the Ministry had provided for its two youngest researchers, gave Hermione a sympathetic grin. 'One of those days?'

Hermione just glared at her. Ever since she had come back from her meeting with the committee an hour ago, she had felt like Reductioing something or having a good cry. Maybe a quick Silencio in Susan's direction would make her feel better? But then she would have to apologise afterwards, and besides Susan was nice enough, just a bit too chatty. At Hermione's look, Susan had quickly directed her attention back to her own heap of parchments.

At that moment, a knock at the door could be heard, and Harry stuck his head in. 'We still on for lunch?'

'Just give me a minute,' Hermione said while she attempted to put the papers she should have been working on into some sort of order. The newly formed stack towered precariously before it sailed in slow motion off the desk, spreading the papers across the tiny room. Hermione picked up the parchments and, with unnecessary force, flung them back on top of the heap that had remained on the desk. She threw Harry, who obviously was trying very hard not to laugh, a dark look. 'Just don't.'

~*~

Hermione and Harry had settled into their favourite Muggle pub for lunch. Hermione hadn't said a word since they had sat down. She stared at a point somewhere in the room without really seeing anything while she picked at the food on her plate.

'Thank you, I am fine. No, and yes, it's good to see you, too.'

Hermione looked up. 'Sorry?' Had she missed something while the morning kept replaying in her head?

'I was filling in the parts of the conversation you didn't make,' Harry said with a grin.

'Oops, sorry, I was distracted. It is actually good to see you. And it's nice to be here.' She waved her hand in a vague gesture, not really caring.

'You didn't get it then.' Harry's grin vanished as he looked at her.

Hermione just shook her head, trying to fight the thing in her throat that kept growing, threatening to suffocate her.

'I'm sorry. But couldn't you go anyway?'

Hermione shook her head again. 'No, I can't afford the travel costs, and living in Alexandria is very expensive.'

'But why do you need to go to Alexandria in the first place? I mean, I know you said it's important for the stuff you're researching, but why Alexandria?'

'The library,' Hermione merely said.

'Why is that library so special? There are loads of libraries around here, aren't there?' Harry looked puzzled.

'Really, Harry. The Magical Library in Alexandria is not just any old library. It's the biggest and oldest magical collection in the world,' Hermione's eyes lit up as she continued.

'It's underground, right beneath the space where the Muggle one once was. You know about that one, don't you? Anyway, it has been there for over two thousand years. It holds a copy of every magical book ever published together with large collections of handwritten parchments and documents in any subject you can imagine. It's so vast it occupies miles and miles underground, and there is a research centre...'

'Okay, I get that it would be a wonderful place for you, but why do you need to go there so urgently?' Harry took a large bite out of his sandwich.

'I need their Dark Arts collection they have some very old manuscripts written in code that I need to look at.' Having just described the library to Harry, Hermione once more became aware that she would probably never see it; the thing in her throat was back.

'Er, I know you have told me before, but what was it again you are working on?' Harry asked.

Hermione stared at him. 'Harry, I must have told you a thousand times!'

Apparently, Harry had found something very interesting in his glass that needed to be investigated before he looked back at Hermione. 'I know. Sorry. Just tell me once more, okay?'

Hermione sighed. 'Basically, I am trying to look deeper into how curses work. My research could help to break some very old curses and create, hm, you could call them rules if you wish for curse-breaking in general. That's why I need to look at these books and papers. Honestly, Harry how did you ever make it through Auror training?'

Harry grinned again. 'Hey, you know, I'm better at practical stuff. But I think I know what you are getting at. So why didn't the Ministry give you the grant? What you're doing could be dead useful to them.'

Hermione shrugged. 'They told me in not so many words that they thought my ideas a bit too esoteric for their tastes and that someone of my background might lack the necessary understanding of the nature of magic.'

Harry had been about to take another bite out of his sandwich, but at Hermione's last sentence he paused, his hand hovering midway to his mouth. 'They did not?'

'They did. There's a lot of competition, and it's not about the actual project. It's all about how well connected you are. And my connections at the Ministry are below zero at the moment,' Hermione stated matter-of-factly, trying not to let on how much it bothered her.

Harry briefly took her hand and squeezed it in sympathy. 'I thought we were past that rubbish,' he said.

Hermione sighed. 'So did I; there just seems to be no end to it. As long as they all thought I was about to become the Minister's daughter-in-law, I was everybody's darling, but now...'

Harry nodded. 'I get similar vibes, though it's a bit harder to discard me; you know me being the one who did away with Voldemort and all that. And it's nothing compared to the crap Kingsley is getting. He reckons that's why he is still only head of the Auror department again. I think he did great as Minister, you know right after the war.'

Hermione remembered the glaring headlines that had been all over wizarding Britain a few years ago. Kingsley had done well as Minister until his relationship with the former wife of Lucius Malfoy had been made public in all sordid details courtesy of the *Daily Prophet*. Within weeks he had been forced to resign. 'I can see where marrying Narcissa Malfoy wasn't exactly the best career move.'

Harry raked his hands through his hair. 'Yeah, must be love or something. So being Muggle-born is bad, if you are not marrying the Minister's son, being half-blood is bad if you are not marrying the Minister's only daughter, and being a pure-blood is bad if you marry Malfoy's ex-wife. What does that tell us?'

'It's bad if you have half a brain and actually use it to make your own decisions?'

Hermione's deduction made them both giggle for a moment before their laughter suddenly died out and both now stared silently at their plates.

'So who did get the grant?' Harry eventually asked.

'Susan Bones,' Hermione said, waiting for Harry's reaction.

'Susan Bones? But, but...'

'Her project is well thought through, manageable in the time allotted to her and will be of benefit to the larger wizarding community,' Hermione quoted. 'In short, it's conventional, boring, and she knows the right people.'

'Do you want me to talk to Kingsley? I am sure he'd be happy to help you,' Harry suggested.

'Do you think he'd go openly against Arthur?' Hermione gave Harry a doubtful look.

'But I always thought Arthur liked you.' Despite their earlier jokes, Harry sounded puzzled.

'Oh, I think, Arthur likes me all right, but Molly doesn't. Not anymore.' Hermione knew that she sounded bitter, but couldn't help it.

Harry insisted, 'Let me at least try to talk to Kingsley.'

Hermione shook her head again and finally gave up on eating. 'Thanks, but no; I'll find another way.'

'What about Gringotts?'

Hermione snorted. 'They said they'd be happy to take me back as a Curse-Breaker, but they don't finance research. And you know much as I loved that job, travelling and everything, I am through with that. I want to investigate things on a different level.' She didn't tell Harry that her current research project felt as if it was the biggest adventure she was yet to embark on. Or not, as it currently looked.

They finished their meal and walked back through the crisp autumn air. In the atrium, they met Percy Weasley, who turned the other way, suddenly very much in a hurry to catch one of the lifts. Hermione and Harry glanced at each other. 'Still *persona non grata* I take it.'

Harry looked hurt. 'Apparently.'

Not knowing what else to say, Hermione gave him a quick hug before she returned to her cubicle.

She spent the rest of the afternoon mostly shifting stacks of parchment around on her desk while she listened to Susan's happy chatter about her travel plans. Hermione knew Susan wasn't aware that Hermione had applied for the same funds, yet she couldn't help thinking how good it would feel to strangle her or, come to think of it, accidentally send a few hexes her way.

It was already getting dark outside when Harry poked his head in again. 'Hermione, have you got a moment?'

Hermione nodded and joined him in the corridor. Harry drew her into a quiet corner.

'You know, I have been thinking. You said you know what you need to look at, right?'

Harry's sudden interest in the particulars of her research was unusual. 'I have a detailed list of books and manuscripts that I'd be looking for; why?'

'Could some of those be found in private collections?' Harry asked.

'I suppose so, though it's fairly Dark stuff, so most people wouldn't admit to having them.'

'You know that after the war the Auror department searched the houses of most of Voldemort's followers, right?'

'Are you suggesting I go traipsing through some Death Eaters' houses, searching for the occasional book?' Hermione wondered what Harry was on about while she tried to fight the growing headache that had been plaguing her all day despite the headache potion she had taken.

'No, I suggest you ask for permission to use the library at Malfoy Manor. From what I can tell, they have one of the largest and most valuable collections of Dark Arts texts in Britain. I am sure the Ministry will happily give you leave to do that.'

Hermione said quickly, 'No, I don't ever want to go back to that place.'

'I know, but it could be a way for you to go on with your research. Promise you will at least think about it,' Harry insisted.

'Right, I'll think about it.'

~*~

After Hermione had finished her work for the day, she decided to walk home instead of Apparating, hoping that the cool evening air would help to alleviate her headache. She didn't feel like cooking, so she picked up some take-away from her favourite Indian.

She loved her tiny flat in the Muggle part of London, especially on days like today when the wizarding world was far too small for her liking. She was greeted at the door by Crookshanks, who immediately let her know that he was rather hungry. His enthusiastic welcome made Hermione smile. Her place wasn't really that big, but it felt so nice to know that all of it was hers to do with as she pleased.

She quickly ate her curry, took a bath, and settled with a cup of cocoa into her favourite armchair, which also happened to be her only armchair. Crookshanks climbed into her lap as quickly as his old bones permitted and curled up, purring contentedly.

Hermione sat, sipped at her hot chocolate and stared out of the window. So, no Alexandria. No weeks spent in the famous library; no chance of meeting all the other researchers, some of whom were said to be veritable scholars. Worst of all, all the work she had been doing was for nothing. She thought about the rolls of parchment she had already written, the countless stacks of notes she had made, all the questions she had, all the theories, the things she wanted to find out. What hurt the most about it all was that it wasn't even about her research. It was all once again about her heritage and her connections, or rather the lack thereof; now that she was no longer a prospective member of the influential Weasley clan. Other than that, nothing had really changed. The same people with the same ideas ruled their world, which obviously held no place for her. Instead, the perspective of endless years of drudgery spent in doing minor research for the petty projects the Ministry would deem fitting for her.

She felt like crying or getting really pissed, preferably both. As usual in these cases, there wasn't a drop of booze anywhere to be found, and she really didn't feel like going out again. Disheartened, she buried her face in Crookshanks's fur, which earned her a puzzled 'mrowr?' in response.

Of course, she could always consider Harry's idea. Malfoy Manor. More precisely, the library of the manor. The family's collection was legendary. Back at Hogwarts she had heard Draco going on and on about how paltry the school library was in comparison to the extensive holdings of his family's library. At the time, she had dismissed it as his usual bragging, but it had turned out not to be an exaggeration when Lucius Malfoy had agreed to have his estate inspected by Aurors after the war.

Hermione was sure she would be able to find a lot of valuable material for her research at the manor's library. To have access to such a source was an opportunity not to be dismissed lightly. What bothered her was its owner. She didn't know what to think of Lucius Malfoy. He had been a Death Eater. Yet, to her disappointment, he had never gone to Azkaban after Voldemort's downfall, showing an almost admirable cunning in wriggling his way out of all the accusations against him.

Hermione sighed. If she'd be more skilled at scheming, she would be on her way to Alexandria now instead of musing about Lucius Malfoy. He probably still hated Muggle-borns but would happily agree to let her use his library to get back into the Ministry's good graces.

If she agreed to Harry's suggestion, she would have to go back to the very place she never wanted to see again in her lifetime, but the opportunity of having access to such a library was almost too good to resist.

She looked at Crookshanks. 'What do you think?'

'Mrowr.'

Two

Chapter 2 of 8

When the Ministry refuses to finance Hermione's research project, the only option she has left is the library at Malfoy Manor. She hasn't met Lucius since the war. What happens when she comes face to face with him again? And what has Snape to do with it all?

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With a very soft noise, Hermione Apparated in front of the heavy iron-wrought manor gates. When she took a step towards them, the dark metal twisted into something that looked like a face. It snarled, 'State your purpose.'

'Hermione Granger. I am here to see the library.' Her voice was a bit wobbly, but to her own ears she sounded confident enough.

With a horrible clanging noise, the metal bars moved back into place, obviously not deeming her statement worthy of an answer. What a terrific beginning. Maybe a good kick would change the gates' opinion? Probably not. It would only add "no manners" to the list of reasons why she wasn't supposed to enter the grounds. Then it began to rain, the typical soft drizzle of early November.

A house-elf was hurrying towards the gates from the other side. He flicked his right hand once, and the gates swung obediently open.

'Thank you,' Hermione said politely to the little creature.

He cast her a nervous look and bowed. As he turned back to the direction he had come from, he murmured, 'I is taking you to master.' Hermione was obviously expected to follow him up the winding narrow lane.

Of course, nothing had changed here. The house-elves were as subjugated as ever, and she wasn't welcome. Even the white peacock that crossed the path in front of her huffed in disdain.

While she followed the elf towards the house, Hermione pondered her decision again, wondering whatever had made her come here. She just hoped the library was worth it.

Then the large manor house loomed before her. It was actually beautiful in its ancient glory when one wasn't dragged up to it as a werewolf's captive. She hadn't much time to admire the front of the house as the elf hurried forward, up broad stone steps, and through the huge front doors that had opened at their approach. They entered a vast entrance hall. A marble flight of stairs dominated the middle of the hall, leading upstairs where it split into galleries that went round both sides and further up. There were portraits on all the walls, doubtless all showing illustrious pure-blood ancestors of the Malfoy family. At Hermione's entrance, there was a commotion, and almost immediately the pictures began whispering among themselves. She quickly fought down the urge to draw her wand in order to fling a few nasty hexes at the venerable Malfoy ancestors, though the idea of the ancient paintings streaked with turpentine courtesy of Hermione Granger served to enhance her mood considerably, if only for a moment.

A second elf clad in a pink tea towel appeared out of nowhere and bowed deeply. 'Welcome to Malfoy Manor, miss. I is taking your cloak.'

'Thank you,' she said kindly. The elf eyed her nervously and hurried away with her cloak.

'Master is waiting for you,' the first elf said, taking off down the long corridor. Hermione again had no other choice but to follow him. To her relief, she wasn't taken to the drawing room. In her head she heard the voice of her Muggle therapist from a few years ago, telling her that she needed to confront her memories. Rubbish in her opinion. Denial was a fine thing.

Finally, the elf showed her into an elegant study. It was sumptuously furnished with a large, dark wooden desk, an ancient leather sofa, and a richly but tastefully ornamented fireplace in which flames were crackling, keeping the room warm. Large bookcases lined the walls. The whole room looked surprisingly comfortable as if someone actually lived there. Hermione blinked in surprise; this wasn't what she had expected.

At her entrance, Lucius Malfoy had risen. He walked around his desk to greet her. Clad in simple but elegant light grey robes, his long blond hair falling loosely down his back, he looked every bit as haughty and arrogant as she remembered him. Neither the war nor Voldemort's subsequent fall seemed to have changed that. But then, he had never really been a Death Eater at heart, or so he had claimed at his trial. Hermione still wondered how he had pulled that one off.

Somehow, Hermione had forgotten how good looking the man was. Momentarily thrown off guard, she noticed absent-mindedly that the colour of his robes exactly matched his eyes.

'Welcome to my home, Miss Granger. It's a pleasure,' he said smoothly.

'Thank you.' She noticed that his eyes flickered briefly to the thin white scar on her neck. So he remembered. Did he wish that his sister-in-law had finished what her little silver knife had started? Hermione could still feel the sharp blade piercing her skin. Or did Lucius Malfoy merely consider it bad taste that she hadn't bothered to hide her scar under a glamour or at least a scarf? She never did, though many people at the Ministry hinted more or less subtly that she should.

'Would you care for some tea?'

'No, thank you. I'd prefer if you could show me the library.' Hermione was aware that her answer was bordering on rudeness, but the less she had to do with Lucius Malfoy the better, though she had to admit that he improved considerably when he wasn't sneering at her. But then, the man's charms were almost as legendary as his schemes.

Lucius nodded. 'As you wish. Will you require guest quarters? I'll be happy to have a room prepared for you.'

Hermione flinched at the thought of staying in his house over night. 'No, thank you, I'll be going home in the evening.'

'Very well, I'll adjust the wards so that you can Apparate directly to the manor. Unless, of course, you'd prefer to walk from the gates?' His polite tone hadn't changed, but one of his eyebrows had arched upward a fracture of an inch.

So he was aware of her reserve towards him. Good.

'Thank you, that would be very convenient.'

Lucius politely led the way to the library. When Hermione entered the room, she drew a breath. She had heard a lot about it, but nothing had prepared her for the view that greeted her. Every wall was lined with bookcases that stretched from floor to ceiling. Several more bookcases were placed throughout the room. The pale afternoon light filtered in through three large windows in one of the walls. A dark table adorned with two candelabras graced the centre of the room, with several very comfortable looking

chairs placed around it. In one corner, Hermione could see a sofa that just seemed to invite one to curl up on it with a book. As in Lucius's study, the flames in the fireplace served to keep the room pleasantly warm while they infused it with a soft light. Full of appreciation, Hermione let her eyes roam along the seemingly endless shelves of books. The room had the typical, very slightly musty smell of well-kept old books that was so wonderful to book lovers everywhere and that no airing could drive away. Hermione inhaled deeply. Life suddenly did look a lot more promising.

She turned to her host. 'This is very impressive. Thank you for the opportunity to conduct research here.' Her smile was almost genuine.

Lucius inclined his head. 'I am always glad to be of service to the Ministry.'

Her employers were the last thing she wanted to think about now. 'Is there any system that I could use to find my way around?'

'I have a few lists of the newer acquisitions, and the books are largely grouped according to age and subject, so I trust you'll be able to find what you need.'

'You mean nobody has ever tried to catalogue these?' How could one have a library like that without wanting to account for all its treasures?

'My great grandfather did. However, the records have since been...misplaced.'

Hermione quickly caught on; apparently, Lucius Malfoy was not too keen on anyone finding out the full extent of his possessions. She wondered if that was due to his recent experiences with Voldemort and the Ministry or if it was a general sign of paranoia. Or caution?

'If you are looking for anything specific, I might be able to point you in the right direction.'

Hermione spun around at the sound of a voice she hadn't heard in years. A slim figure, clad in black, stood half hidden behind a shelf.

'Miss Granger, I presume you know Severus Snape.'

Hermione stared at the man who was believed to be Merlin-knew-where but certainly not here. Where had he been since his narrow escape from Voldemort's attempt to murder him?

Severus took a step forward. 'Miss Granger.'

'Prof...' No, that was wrong; he wasn't a teacher anymore. 'You are back.' Hermione finally remembered that staring at other people was rarely taken as a warm greeting.

'Still a penchant for stating the obvious, I see. But yes, I am back,' he answered without offering any further explanation.

Lucius chose that moment to take part in their conversation. 'Miss Granger, I hope you won't mind sharing your workspace with Severus.'

'No, of course not,' she replied, though she felt as if she'd just been assigned a watchdog.

Lucius turned to the other wizard. 'Severus, would you kindly assist Miss Granger with some of the volumes that might be reluctant to be handled by her.'

Hermione knew that some Dark Arts texts were keyed to respond only favourably to their owners with everyone else prone to nasty consequences, but right now this sounded like another proof of Lucius's views on pure-blood supremacy.

Severus inclined his head the fraction of an inch. 'Certainly, I'll assist you, but I would ask you not to interfere with my own work.'

Her curiosity piqued, Hermione wondered what Snape was working on. It was bound to be interesting.

~*~

Hermione blew lightly on the coffee in her cup; it was just that little bit too hot. Outside the sky was still dark. A very disgruntled Crookshanks barely looked at her as he munched away at his breakfast after she had interrupted his beauty sleep so untimely early. His mistress poured herself a second cup of coffee and went once more over the two rolls of parchment on which she had written down which materials she was looking for. Did she really need all three volumes of Lariviere's *Poison et pouvoir*? Yes, definitely. What about Medardus's *Von den dunklen Künsten, ihren Ursprüngen und Anwendungen*? Absolutely. Another note on the parchment. And what about Audley's *Legends of Curses Moste Vile*? Hermione grabbed a new piece of parchment and wrote the title down. What else might there be in the library? She couldn't wait to have a closer look at all the treasures it held. Besides, its owner had been rather pleasant. Well, what had she expected? That he would hex her at first sight? It stood to reason that Malfoy was eager to prove his good will to the Ministry, so he had to tolerate her despite the fact that he would probably love to hex her or worse. Still, he had been surprisingly nice. For a fleeting moment, Hermione wondered who warmed his bed now after his divorce. She shook her head; best not to go there.

She put her parchments into her bag, made sure that her hair wasn't any more unruly than usual and that her cloak matched her robes. Then she was ready to go. She hoped that Lucius Malfoy had remembered to adjust the wards.

He had, as she found out when she could Apparate directly to the front door, which meant she didn't have to deal with the cranky gates again. The same house-elf as the day before greeted her; today she wore a light green tea-towel embroidered with flowers. 'Good morning, miss.'

'Good morning...sorry, what's your name?'

Suddenly the elf started to fidget, probably because she thought Hermione wanted to complain about her. Something really needed to be done about the way Lucius Malfoy treated his elves.

'Tinky. I is Tinky. Does miss want to go to the library?'

'Yes, please,' Hermione said, trying to sound as polite as possible to reassure the little creature. It didn't help. As they had reached the library she had barely time to thank Tinky before the elf hurried away as quickly as she could.

Hermione entered the library and blinked to find not only Snape already there but Lucius Malfoy as well. She didn't think he would be up that early. The two were sitting at the table, heads bent over a piece of parchment, discussing something in hushed whispers. At her entrance, their talk stopped immediately.

Lucius Malfoy stood up. 'Good morning, Miss Granger. I trust the wards recognised you?'

'Good morning. Yes, thank you,' Hermione said.

'My pleasure. If there is anything else you require, please do not hesitate to let me or Severus know. Now, you must excuse me.' With a slight bow in her direction, he turned and left. Perfect manners were a refreshing novelty after being used to Ron's lack thereof.

She made her way over to the table where Severus was sitting. He looked at her with an expression she was unable to discern. Hermione drew a breath and reminded herself firmly that she wasn't a student anymore. 'Erm, Mr Snape, I wondered if you could help me locate some of these?' she asked, handing him the parchments with the titles.

Without a word, he took them and began to peruse the list. Hermione used the opportunity to look him over. He looked pretty much as she remembered him. He was still very thin, but had lost some of the gauntness that had characterised him during her sixth year. His lanky black hair had grown a bit longer, which served to underline the

prominent features of his face. It rather suited him. And he still dressed in black with many buttons. Hermione smiled as she remembered the fantasies these buttons and the man wearing them had inspired when she was at school.

Just above his collar, the edge of a scar was visible. Hermione involuntarily touched her own scar as the picture of Snape lying in his own blood on the floor of the Shrieking Shack came back to her. She still blamed herself that she hadn't thought about checking his pulse, all too easily assuming that he was dead. She also remembered her almost joyous relief when she had learnt that he had survived.

'That is a very impressive list.' Snape interrupted her train of thought. 'Your research is on ancient curses, am I correct?'

That was amazing; nobody before had drawn that conclusion so quickly. Hermione beamed at him. 'Essentially, yes. Though I am mostly interested in the laws that govern the creation of curses.'

'Would you mind telling me more about your project? And do sit down.'

Hermione sat quickly. Here at last was someone who was likely to understand what she was talking about, and he seemed interested as well. 'I am looking into the nature of curses or, more specifically, malevolent enchantments. While it obviously depends on the intent as well as the skill and knowledge of the caster, there are a number of other factors I don't understand yet. Such as why some curses become stronger over time while others get weaker, or how it is possible to target specific people or groups of people when creating a cursed object while others remain unharmed. There are objects that contain several layers of curses so ancient and complex that no one today is able to break these. At their most sophisticated level, these would involve not only spell casting but also a knowledge of Arithmancy, certain potions or even blood magic. Some of the manuscripts and books I am looking for describe these, though some of them are probably written in code. I am hoping to find some of the keys as well.' Hermione saw Snape looking at her with newfound interest.

'Of course, that would presuppose that the creation of curses does indeed follow certain rules and laws,' Snape pointed out.

Hermione's eyes lit up. 'Yes. According to the basic principle of Arithmancy, everything does, even if we are not aware of it.'

'I see. You are, of course, aware that some of these books might be protected by curses themselves. Forgive my curiosity, but where does your interest in curses derive from?'

'I worked as a Curse-Breaker for Gringotts, and the number of different curses in existence is amazing. After a while, I began to wonder about their nature and the laws that govern them. If you don't mind, what are you working on? I mean you are here to work on something, aren't you?'

A corner of his mouth curled ever so slightly upward. 'Yes, Miss Granger. I am indeed working on something. Lucius and I both trust you to know your way around a library and a collection of Dark Arts texts.'

'Sorry. Well then, what are you working on? If you don't mind telling me.' Hermione leant forward in her chair.

'My work is actually in the same area as yours. I am writing a book on the history and variety of curses in different countries, so I'd be looking into similar things as you do.'

'Is that what you have been doing all the time, travelling? I saw a couple of places when I worked for Gringotts. It was fascinating.' She had loved this part of her job that allowed her to explore foreign cities and their wizarding quarters.

'Among other things, yes. There is actually a much richer history of the Dark Arts in Europe than we are commonly led to believe.'

That sounded fascinating. Myriads of questions immediately popped up in Hermione's mind. Before she had the chance to ask even one of them, Snape cut the conversation short by standing up. 'Let's go and find some of your books.'

~*~

A/N: Poison et pouvoir ... poison and power

Von den dunklen Künsten, ihren Ursprüngen und Anwendungen ... Of the Dark Arts, their origins, and uses

Three

Chapter 3 of 8

When the Ministry refuses to finance Hermione's research project, the only option she has left is the library at Malfoy Manor. She hasn't met Lucius since the war. What happens when she comes face to face with him again? And what has Snape to do with it all?

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~*~

Apparently, most of wizarding Britain had chosen this Saturday to do their Christmas shopping, Hermione thought as she was trying to find her way through the jostling crowds in Diagon Alley. It was every bit as bad as the Christmas shopping in the Muggle shops she had tackled the previous Saturday. She watched a little girl throwing a tantrum that sent a nearby stack of cauldrons flying before they blew up into smithereens. No, this was worse; at least Muggle children didn't cause literal explosions.

Hermione's train of thought was arrested by the beautiful window display of Scribbulus Everchanging Inks. The luxurious eagle quills were really magnificent. She looked at a black one, imagining how it would feel to hold it in her hand and to run her finger along the soft feathery material. Though that one would really look best in the hands of a sophisticated male wizard. In her mind, she saw an image of an elegant hand holding one of those quills, stroking her neck, slowly progressing lower down her body and up again. She sighed wistfully as she contemplated the quills for a while longer but couldn't think of any of her friends who would appreciate a present like that.

After another quick check of her list, she was sure that she had everything she needed. A quick look at her watch confirmed that she had enough time left to pop into Flourish and Blotts before she'd meet Harry for drinks at the Leaky Cauldron. She turned to cross the street to the bookshop when someone bumped into her. 'Ouch. Oh,

hi, Neville.'

'Hi, Hermione; sorry about that.'

Hermione turned to the young man. 'No problem, it's mad here today. Haven't seen you in while. How are you?'

Neville grinned back. 'Yeah, it's bedlam. I'm fine, that is, I will be after I've found a present for Alice.'

Hermione smiled. The way Neville spoiled his little daughter rotten, she found it highly doubtful that he would end up with just one present. 'I am sure you'll find something exciting for her.'

'I'll try. Are you coming to the Leaky later on? I'm sure Hannah would love to see you.'

Hermione nodded. 'I'm meeting Harry for drinks there in half an hour.'

Neville beamed. 'Oh good, it'll be nearly all the old gang.' Seeing Hermione's crestfallen face, he quickly added, 'Well, almost; those who matter, anyway.'

'Right. I'll see you then.'

Hermione watched Neville's back disappear among the other shoppers. "The old gang" ... that seemed such a long time ago. Ron and Ginny still refused to talk to either Harry or her. She had hoped that they all could eventually be friends again, but at the moment it didn't look like it.

~*~

Hermione tried to avoid bumping into anyone as she made her way through the noisy crowd over to the quiet corner where Harry was already sitting. When she finally reached the table, she felt fairly exhausted. Flopping down into a chair, she said, 'Why do they all choose the same day to go shopping?'

Harry grinned. 'Never figured that one out, must have something to do with Christmas.'

'Probably. This year it feels weird though.'

Harry's grin disappeared. 'Yeah, I know. It's the first time for years that we won't be at the Burrow. I'll miss it. Do you ever wish...you know?'

Hermione considered this for a moment. 'No. I mean I'll be sorry to miss out on the Christmas dinner, of course, but no. It still feels like I did the right thing. If I hadn't been travelling around so much, I probably would have realised much sooner that Ron and I would never work out. I am only sorry I left to drag it on for so long.'

'You make it sound so easy. I miss them; it felt so much like they were my family.'

It must be so much harder for Harry. At least she still had parents, even if they had chosen to remain in Australia. Hermione quickly squeezed his hand. 'I know, it isn't easy. Actually, I think Ron is a prat for not talking to you. I mean, you two have been friends for so long, and me breaking up with him has nothing to do with that or you and Ginny splitting up.'

Their gloomy mood was interrupted by Neville. He put a mug of tea in front of Hermione before he sat down. From the way he fidgeted around on his chair, it was obvious that he had at least heard part of their conversation. 'Erm, I had planned on asking you anyway, why don't you two have Christmas Dinner with us? Hannah and I would love to have you. Dean and Luna are coming, too. It should be fun.'

Hermione was glad about the invitation. Judging by the look of relief on his face, so was Harry. It sounded a lot better than Christmas dinner with Kreacher and Crookshanks.

'Hermione, haven't seen you in a bit. I heard from Minerva that you managed to wheedle some research time out of the Ministry,' Neville said.

Hermione nodded. 'Yes, I'm using the library at Malfoy Manor. It's really really good. A lot of the things I need are there. It's amazing. Just yesterday, I came across these manuscripts where the writer details all the effects curses have, depending on slight variations they can have very different results, and he is very specific about the alterations and their effects, and then I found...' She stopped when she noticed Neville and Harry were looking at her oddly.

'Erm, Hermione, don't take this the wrong way, but don't you think you might be getting a bit too much into all this Dark Arts stuff?' Harry asked carefully.

The look Hermione gave him would have withered a plant had there been any in the vicinity. 'And why exactly do you think that is?'

'Because it's all you ever talk about. You almost sound like Snape.'

'And what's wrong with that? In case you've forgotten, Snape is a war hero and all that. You of all people should have some respect for him.' Hermione stabbed her finger into Harry's direction.

'I do. You know that I do. I think he is really brave and everything. And I don't hate him anymore, but that still doesn't mean I have to like him all that much,' Harry said.

'I suppose not. But it's actually very nice to work with him. He knows so much not only about the Dark Arts or potions, about other things, too. He's really really brilliant.'

'Don't you think it's odd, though? Him hanging around the manor all the time?' Neville piped up.

'Why? He's using the library, just as I do.' Hermione, a bit calmer now, took a sip of her tea.

'But isn't he living there as well?' Harry asked.

Hermione shrugged. 'You know his house burnt down, and he hasn't been back that long. Besides, he and Lucius Malfoy are friends.'

'Honestly, who would want to be friends with Lucius Malfoy. I mean the man was a Death Eater. He should be rotting in Azkaban if you ask me,' Neville said.

'I know, it's a shame. Hermione, couldn't you dig up some dirt on him while you're there?' Harry's face suddenly lit up.

Hermione stared at her friend. 'Really, Harry, you can't be serious. He has willingly opened his house and his library, and you expect me to go snooping around? Even if I'd do it, and even if I'd find something, you couldn't use it as evidence anyway. Besides, he has been perfectly nice to me.' Hermione couldn't believe that she was coming close to defending Lucius Malfoy, but it was true. So far, he had indeed been amiable towards her.

Harry raised his hands in mock defeat. 'Right, I give up. But Neville is right; it is strange that Snape is there all the time.'

'I told you they're friends.'

They didn't touch on the subject of Snape and Malfoy or Hermione's possible love affair with the Dark Arts again, and a pleasant afternoon was had by all.

~*~

With a frustrated sigh, Hermione put down the manuscript she had been holding. She had been trying to decipher the code for hours now and hadn't even come close to

making sense out of a single line. She looked at Severus, who was trying the same with a different manuscript. He was bent over it in concentration; his prominent nose nearly touched the paper while his black hair obscured most of his face. She loved to watch him when he was working. He always gave the task at hand his full attention, shutting out everything else. Sometimes she had the impression she could almost see the way his brilliant mind worked as he came to a conclusion.

With only a few days to go, she started to wonder what Christmas at the manor would be like. Would Lucius invite important people to a sumptuous dinner to celebrate in style? Or would it be a smaller affair, or just the two of them? Would Draco be there, or would he prefer to be with his own friends? Did Christmas mean all that much to Lucius now that his son was grown up and his wife had remarried? And Snape? Did he care at all, or would he prefer a quiet day with a good book? Hermione suddenly remembered a Muggle tale from her childhood and pictured Snape saying 'bah, humbug' at the mention of Christmas. The image made her giggle.

'And what exactly is so funny, Miss Granger?' Hermione found Severus watching her intently.

'Nothing, I just remembered something.'

Severus merely raised an eyebrow.

'I can't make heads or tails out of these. I have been at it since this morning, and it still doesn't make sense. It feels like it is all there, and I just don't see it,' Hermione said.

'Given that these are coded documents, it is, indeed, all there as you put it, but the point in using a code is that one is not meant to "see" it unless one knows the required key,' Severus observed.

'Yes, thank you, the definition of what a code is will certainly help us a great deal,' Hermione answered quickly.

'I was merely pointing out that the inability to decipher these is not necessarily your shortcoming,' Severus said.

Had he just complimented her? Hermione smiled. 'So what it comes down to is that we need to find the key to these.'

'Indeed, and then we must hope that the other codes work in a similar fashion.'

Hermione looked at the manuscript again; she suddenly realised how tired she was and said, 'I think, I'll call it a day. Good night, Sev... Mr Snape.'

Hermione left quickly before he could reply with a sarcastic comment on her nearly using his given name. Working with him had become so agreeable that she had started to refer to him as "Severus" in her mind. She would have to make sure not to slip again.

~*~

Sitting at the small desk that was tucked into a corner of her living room, Hermione rifled through the stack of parchments before her. Where was the damn thing? She got up and searched through her bag again; still, the sheet with the notes she had made that day was nowhere to be found. She must have left it in the library, which meant she couldn't do much before the holidays were over.

Unless she went back to fetch it. But it was late and Christmas Eve. Wouldn't Lucius think that an intrusion into his privacy? She glanced at the little Muggle clock that was sitting precariously on the edge of a shelf overflowing with books. It wasn't really that late. Still...

On the other hand she hated to be forced to inactivity until after Christmas. Hermione chewed on her bottom lip as she was trying to make up her mind. After a few more moments of indecision, she glanced at the clock again. She would quickly Apparate to the manor, go quietly to the library and fetch her notes. Nobody would even realise that she had been there. Quickly slipping on a pair of comfortable shoes and the robes she had worn during the day, she left again for the Malfoy home.

~*~

The usual elf appeared out of nowhere to greet Hermione despite the late hour. 'Good evening, miss. Can Tinky get miss anything?'

'No, thank you, I just forgot something. I'll be quick.' The elf scurried away. Hermione looked after her. It was nearly unbearable how nervous they always were. Something really needed to be done about this, though she hadn't actually seen Lucius mistreat any of the elves. But that was probably only because he wanted her good opinion to be passed on to the Ministry.

Hermione was deep in thought about the plight of the house-elves before she noticed that this was the first time she was in the house at night. She paused for a moment. It wasn't half as scary as she had thought. So far, her whole experience at the manor hadn't been bad. On the contrary, the library was marvellous, her host was pleasant, and sharing her workspace with Severus was surprisingly enjoyable. The house looked different than she remembered it. She couldn't pinpoint it, but somehow it seemed a bit warmer despite its appearance that was clearly designed to impress visitors, not to make them feel at home.

Hermione stood in the corridor that led to the library and then abruptly turned around in the direction of the drawing room. Outside the door, she paused. Did she really want to do this? She took a deep breath and slowly, very slowly pushed the door open. She paused again. One step, another, and then she was inside the very room that had haunted her for so long. At her entrance, a number of candles had flared to light. Other than that, nothing happened.

Hermione stood very still until suddenly the memories came flooding back to her. She heard again the leering words of Fenrir and felt the nameless terror they had inspired in her. She saw Draco turn away in disgust at what was happening, and Lucius retreating to the back of the room, his face blank. She heard again the mad, cackling laughter of Bellatrix Lestrange while her body convulsed under the excruciating pain of the Cruciatus Curse. She wasn't aware that tears were streaming down her face, then someone screamed.

'Miss Granger?' A voice from somewhere beyond the haze of pain and fear.

'Miss Granger, are you all right?'

She jumped when a hand lightly touched her arm. Coming back to the present, she found Lucius Malfoy standing in front of her, a look of concern on his face.

'No, I am bloody well not all right, thanks to you and your... your cronies. You just stood there and let it all happen. Did you enjoy watching? Would you have let her kill me? Would you have enjoyed turning me over to your werewolf friend? You just... You...!' The accusations she hurled at him turned into helpless anguished sobs. It seemed, now that she had started, she couldn't stop crying.

Lucius didn't say or do anything. He just stood there, waiting until Hermione had finished. When her desperate crying had turned into little dry heaves, he Conjured a glass of brandy, took a handkerchief out of his robes and handed her both without saying a word.

Hermione's hand was shaking, but she took a sip of the dark liquid. Its fiery warmth ran down her throat into her stomach, making her feel calmer. She took another sip and drew a few deep breaths. Lucius still hadn't said a word.

'I am sorry. I shouldn't be snooping around. I'll go.' She just wanted to be home, curled up in her warm bed.

Lucius didn't move, still watching her, his eyes holding an expression she could not discern. 'Would you do me the favour to share a glass of wine with me, Miss Granger?' His tone was carefully neutral.

'Are you trying to get me drunk?' Hermione asked.

'I was merely offering conversation... and company.' Still the same guarded voice.

'Here?'

'No, my study is more comfortable.' A little bit of warmth had infused both his voice and his eyes.

Hermione nodded. She didn't trust him, but she didn't really want to be alone. It didn't occur to her that she had just agreed to be alone with Lucius Malfoy.

He led the way to his study. As she settled into the leather sofa, she thought that the study was indeed cosy; it was a striking difference to the rest of the house.

Lucius handed her a glass of dark, red wine. He remained standing, leaning comfortably against the edge of the desk and silently raised his glass to her. Hermione had to admit that the wine was excellent. Her parents had made sure that she was able to distinguish a good vintage from cheap vinegar, but she rarely had had occasion to benefit from that knowledge in recent years.

'How is your research coming along, Miss Granger?'

Grateful for his choice of topic, Hermione answered, 'Very well, thank you. The books you have are a great help. They contain descriptions of curses I have never come across before. We've started on the manuscripts, but a lot of them are written in code, and unless we either manage to decipher it or find a key, we won't be able to do anything with them. It's great though, that all this was written down.'

'Yes, it seems in earlier times people were very meticulous about making records about the spells they invented. Actually, Severus still does that.'

So he had retained that habit, Hermione thought, remembering his old Potions book. 'I know, we came across one of his old school books back at Hogwarts. It's amazing he still does that.'

'Hm, yes, Severus is very thorough in every thing he does, very inventive, too.' Lucius smiled, pouring them another glass of the fine wine.

The study felt warm and safe as they drank quietly. Mesmerised, Hermione watched Lucius circle the rim of his wineglass with his finger. Her eyes followed the slow motion wishing his finger would slip into the red liquid. Someone would have to lick it off, then. Around her the room started to fade slowly.

Smiling, Lucius looked at her before he said softly, 'Contrary to what you may think, Miss Granger, I do not enjoy violence. It is crude and uncivilised.'

That was the last thing she heard before she drifted into nothingness.

Four

Chapter 4 of 8

When the Ministry refuses to finance Hermione's research project, the only option she has left is the library at Malfoy Manor. She hasn't met Lucius since the war. What happens when she comes face to face with him again? And what has Snape to do with it all?

Many thanks to my lovely betas Anogete and Dacian Goddess.

JKR's, not mine.

~*~

Hermione yawned and stretched languidly when her hand came into contact with something that shouldn't have been there. It felt smooth and soft, not at all like the headboard of her bed. She ran her hand along the material again. No, definitely not her own bed.

Sitting up, she opened her eyes and found herself on the leather sofa in Lucius's study. Someone had put a pillow under her head and covered her with a warm blanket. Suddenly wary, Hermione lifted a corner of it. Peering under it, she was glad to find herself still fully clothed. Apparently, the same someone had only loosened the upper buttons of her robe. Her shoes were standing next to the sofa. She rubbed her eyes, remembering the evening. The drawing room, Lucius, the wine... Lucius. They had been talking; she must have fallen asleep...unless there had been something in the wine. She wouldn't put it beyond him, though why he should do that did, for the moment, escape Hermione. Her train of thought was interrupted by a knock at the door. Tinky popped her head in. 'What would miss like for breakfast?'

'Oh, thank you, Tinky, I am not hungry.'

Upon hearing Hermione's answer, the elf's ears dropped. 'But master said to give miss breakfast.'

Of course; and if she refused, Tinky would be punished. Hermione sighed. 'Actually, I'd like a cup of coffee, please.'

Tinky visibly perked up. 'And toast? With jam?'

'Yes, toast would be nice.'

A much happier looking elf disappeared. Only minutes later, a silver tray materialised on the little table next to Hermione. It contained a cup of steaming hot coffee and a plate with two pieces of toast.

Hermione had to admit that she felt much better after her little repast. She buttoned up her robes, put her shoes back on and put the folded blanket on the sofa. Then she went to the library to pick up the notes she had originally come for the day before.

It seemed to be still very early, as both the corridors and the library were empty. She quickly found her missing notes and was just about to put them back into her bag when she noticed an odd pinkish glow from the back of the room. She went to investigate and found it coming from a shelf she had never seen before. As she bent down for a closer inspection, she saw that it was emanating from a small book which, by the looks of it, was very old. When she touched it, it flared up in bright gold and almost jumped into her hand. The front cover was blank; its pages were yellow with age and completely empty. How odd, Hermione thought, suddenly a bit suspicious of it as she put it back. She walked back to the table, the book floating after her unnoticed until it gently nudged her hand. Then, it lay motionless on the table right next to her bag. Hermione was familiar enough with the mechanics of magic to know that it wouldn't make any sense to try to put the book back again; it would only return to her. She quickly took out her wand and ran a few spells, but couldn't detect any signs of Dark Magic. She flipped through it again, yet the pages were still empty. She decided to leave it on the table and take another look at it in the following week, but, apparently, the book had other ideas because it slowly moved closer to her bag. Remembering

the incident involving Ginny Weasley and a certain diary all too well, Hermione tried more diagnostic spells on the little book, still detecting no sign of anything sinister. Experimentally, she opened her bag to see what would happen. The little book quickly scurried into it. 'If you insist,' Hermione said, hoping that nobody would mind if she borrowed it.

She was on her way to the front door when a familiar voice greeted her. 'Miss Granger. I trust you slept well?'

She turned around to see Lucius Malfoy standing at the foot of the stairs. 'Yes, thank you ... did you drug me?' She blurted out.

The corners of his mouth twitched. 'No, Miss Granger, you managed that rather well on your own.'

Was he actually smiling? It looked extremely well on him. Hermione thought that it would be nice to see his smile more often and felt suddenly very embarrassed. 'Right, I'll be going, then,' she murmured. 'Oh, and Happy Christmas.'

'Happy Christmas, Miss Granger.'

~*~

Hermione returned home to find a puzzled Crookshanks staring at Harry's head poking out of her fireplace. A small heap of parcels lay in front of it. Harry grinned. 'Happy Christmas. Presents, those are from your parents and that is mine. Oh, and where have you been? I was a bit worried.'

'I was at the manor,' Hermione answered.

'What, this early? On Christmas day?'

'Actually, I stayed the night.' Hermione tried very hard not to blush, despite the fact that there was nothing to blush about.

Harry stared at her. 'You spent the night? With Lucius Malfoy? Are you out of your mind?'

Now Hermione was definitely blushing. 'I didn't say I spent the night *with* Lucius Malfoy. I said I stayed overnight. There's a difference, as you well know. And besides, Lucius Malfoy wouldn't look at me anyway; wrong heritage, remember?'

'And for once I am glad of it. Besides, I was only joking. Right, I'll see you at Neville's.' Harry's head disappeared.

Hermione dropped off her bag, fed Crookshanks and made some more coffee, though hers wasn't half as good as the coffee at the manor, and then went back to the living room to open her presents.

Instead, she found herself staring at the empty fireplace. Lucius would never look at her twice. All she'd ever be to him would be the Muggle-born he had to tolerate in his library to stay in good graces with the Ministry, though he would probably phrase that a bit differently.

Besides, she hated the man, didn't she? She knew he had refrained from any open hostilities at the end of the war. She also remembered Severus telling her in one of his more talkative moods during their shared library time that Voldemort had tortured Lucius in punishment for his "failures" in any way he could, short of actually killing him, and that he had taken the wizard's wand, leaving him powerless...which was one of the worst things a wizard could do to another. What if there was a grain of truth in what he had claimed at his trial, that he had merely tried to survive and to protect his family? That didn't make the things he had done any less horrible, but at least that was something she could understand. Still, he would never be interested in someone like her.

If only she could get his smile and the image of his finger tracing the rim of his glass out of her head. With a sigh, she returned her attention to her presents, not noticing that the little book soared out of her bag to land on her bedside table where it fell open at a certain page with another golden gleam.

~*~

Hermione's head was bent low over her manuscript when she had the feeling of someone watching her. She glanced at Severus, whose posture resembled her own, then looked up to find Lucius standing in the door to the library, his eyes on her. How long had he been there? Seeing that she had noticed him, Lucius strode forward and put the ancient book bound in black leather he had been carrying on the table. 'I think I may have found what you were looking for.'

'You have found the keys?' Severus asked, a note of incredulity in his voice.

'At least one of them. My ancestors found it advisable not to keep all of their books in one place.'

'Thanks, that is great.' Hermione reached for the book, then stopped her hand. Looking at him she asked. 'Is it safe for me to handle it?'

'Yes, I removed all protective spells from it.'

Hermione opened the book; as she looked through it, she exclaimed, 'That is fantastic; it's exactly what we need.'

She pushed the book towards Severus who leafed through it as well, stopping here and there to check something. He nodded. 'Yes, that looks, indeed, like it could be a breakthrough. What a timely coincidence you could locate it just now, Lucius.'

'Indeed.'

~*~

He was stretched out on the large bed in all his naked glory. And glorious he was, his elegant hands tied to the headboard with silver-grey, silken scarves, his hair spread out over the pillow. He looked at her kneeling between his thighs, his eyes clouded with lust. Hermione twirled the feather she was holding in her hands. She bent forward a little and ran it very slowly down his right arm, over his collarbones and up his left arm, enjoying the little shivers her action caused in him. She started down the left arm, but this time she lingered on his collarbone and then very swiftly swiped the feather over his left nipple. Satisfied with the little sigh that came out of his mouth, she did the same thing to the right nipple and then went up the right arm. This time, the sighs sounded a little impatient. Hermione grinned as she caressed his nipples again, then his belly and the place where his hip joined his thigh. He whimpered, jutting his hips upward. 'Patience, dear.'

She sat back and proceeded to lightly run the feather down his thigh, up again, through the patch of hair that descended from his navel, and then down the other thigh, enjoying his moans which were becoming more and more urgent. She gave in and stroked his length with the feather once, causing him to jerk his hips upward. Satisfied with his reaction, she repeated her caress, enjoying the view.

He moaned again. 'Hermione, please...'

'Hermione, please what, Lucius? Would you like me to continue?' She stroked his cock with the feather again.

'Or would you like me to do something else?' She quickly bent forward and placed a kiss on his tip.

'Yes, something else... please.' He strained against the silken scarves.

'I love to hear you beg. Still not very precise, my dear, but I guess I'll have to improvise a little then, won't I?' With that Hermione bent forward again and licked up and down his length, causing Lucius to moan louder in response. She smiled and took him in her mouth...

'That doesn't make any sense.'

Her daydream rudely interrupted, Hermione shot back. 'What doesn't make any sense?'

Severus looked at her oddly for a moment before he answered, 'This translation. The original code was less garbled than this, this is completely useless.'

Hermione snatched the parchment from him. 'Fine. I don't remember asking for your judgement.'

'No, but you did ask for my opinion. Believe me, otherwise I wouldn't have bothered.' He scowled.

She had indeed asked him what he thought of the page in question, she now remembered. 'I suppose I did. Sorry. Any idea where I went wrong?' As an offer of peace she held the piece of parchment out to him again.

He took it back, and his expression softened a little. 'I think this here needs to be different...and that.' He circled the passages with his quill before he handed the page back to her.

Hermione looked at the corrections he had made and saw immediately what he meant. It was obvious; how could she have overlooked it? She started over again, and to her satisfaction, the sentences now began to make sense. After a while she glanced up again to see Severus still looking at her, his face inscrutable.

'Are you sure you're all right, Miss Granger? You have been working very hard; maybe you should take a little break?'

Hermione was surprised by his concern. 'No, thanks, I am fine. I was just a bit distracted.'

'Very well. Let me know if you need anything.'

Hermione knew exactly what she needed; their host, preferably naked, and soon. Unfortunately, that was not likely to happen.

The host in question chose just that moment to make an appearance.

'Miss Granger, Severus, would you like to join me for tea?'

~*~

Tea was served in the drawing room. For Hermione, the room no longer held any horrors. She had deliberately gone back to it after the New Year, this time in daylight. The first time when she had gone in there at night, she hadn't noticed that it had been redecorated since the war and now looked completely different from what she remembered. No memories assaulted her this time as she looked around, actually seeing how beautiful the room now was. It seemed that her outburst on Christmas Eve had once and for all taken care of the old ghosts.

They sat down on the sofa and the armchairs that were grouped around the fireplace. Hermione watched in fascination as a silver tea tray materialised on the little table next to them. It contained a steaming teapot, three tea cups, a matching milk jug and a sugar bowl all made of finest white china. There also were two plates. One held sandwiches, the other an assortment of biscuits.

Hermione couldn't keep from smiling. She had just met the first person who kept to the rather aristocratic ritual of afternoon tea, cucumber sandwiches included. When she was younger, tea had meant mostly an early dinner. But then again the world of her childhood was as different as could be from the world Lucius lived in. Her parents weren't poor by any standards. They were educated, open-minded people who kept a comfortable, modern home. She had loved their house with the little garden, but it was completely different from the ancient glory of Malfoy Manor.

Recently, she often wondered what it must be like to live in a world that was so shaped by inherited traditions and affluence, and to be so sure of one's place in that world, to never have any doubt where one belonged.

She looked at Severus, wondering what his childhood teas had been like. From what Harry had told her of the memories he had seen, she knew Severus had been working-class and poor and that his home had not been a happy one. If her suspicions about him were correct, he must have felt even more alone than she had when she had first started at Hogwarts. And what a terrible price he had paid for trying to find a place in their world. At least now he seemed to be content enough, and working with him was very agreeable.

Lucius poured the tea into a cup. 'Miss Granger, how do you take your tea?'

'A drop of milk and no sugar, please,' she answered.

Lucius added the milk and handed her the cup, then he proceeded to prepare a cup for Severus and himself. Hermione noticed that he knew how Severus took his tea, so obviously this wasn't a first. She felt almost special at being included. Both men took milk, but no sugar. She waited until all were served before she tasted the tea. As could be expected, it was excellent.

'That's very nice. I've never tasted tea like this before.'

Lucius smiled at her compliment. 'Thank you. I have it blended especially as I find none of the brands available to my taste.'

All three took a moment to savour their tea.

'Severus, I talked to Daphne at Dust and Mildew today. She said they'd be happy to publish your book. Would you like me to negotiate a contract with them?'

Severus said, 'Yes, why don't you do that since you seem to get along rather well with her.'

'Yes, she seems to like me, which is helpful when one is doing business together.'

Hermione was certain that the poor woman didn't stand a chance against Lucius; Severus would get a very good deal on his book. She felt a tiny pang. Just how well did Lucius get along with her?

'Miss Granger, have you thought about publishing your research? If you do, I'd be happy to be of assistance,' Lucius said.

'No, I don't even know if I can. I assume the Ministry would want to see it first.'

Severus frowned. 'In that case, it'll never see the light of day.'

Despite her own experiences with her employers, Hermione asked, 'Why?'

'It's too dangerous. Too close to the Dark Arts. The people running the Ministry now believe in a world that is either good or bad, nothing in between. Your research touches on too many areas they'd rather stay away from. Besides, if your results become public, the whole committee will be exposed for the fools that they are for not giving you that grant. If you make your findings available to the Ministry, they'll just disappear as one subaltern after another has to approve yet another minor detail,' Severus stated

matter-of-factly.

Hermione knew that he was right, but wasn't ready to admit it. 'Maybe it simply isn't that relevant.'

'Miss Granger, fishing for compliments is unworthy of you. You know quite well what you are capable of.'

She smiled at Severus's compliment, however veiled it had been. She liked the way he slightly inclined his head in response to her smile. 'What do you suggest I do?'

'First and foremost, it's your work, so you decide what to do with it. If you decide to publish it independently from the Ministry, there is little they can do about it,' Severus said.

'You mean apart from firing me.' Hermione watched as Lucius selected one of the chocolate-covered biscuits. He caught her eyes and made a show of taking a bite, delicately licking a morsel of the chocolate off, and then slowly eating the rest with ostentatious relish. She swallowed.

She turned to find Severus observing her, his black eyes intense with something she couldn't discern, his face once again inscrutable. His gaze did nothing to quieten down the wriggly things that had somehow taken up residence in her stomach.

~*~

Clouds of smoke were hanging over the bubbling cauldron. Good thing she knew how to Conjure portable fires, Hermione thought, otherwise she wouldn't be able to brew her own potions in her kitchen. She stirred twice more clockwise. Checking on the instructions in the little book again, she proceeded to tip the Ashwinder eggs into the cauldron; seven counter clockwise stirs followed, then the potion was almost ready...except for one vital ingredient. She took the sharp silver dagger, remembering how adamant the instructions had been at that point, and cut off a strand of her hair. She hesitated for a second, took a deep breath and let the hairs slip into the cauldron. There was a low hiss before the potion turned into a clear liquid from which multicoloured spirals of steam rose.

Five

Chapter 5 of 8

When the Ministry refuses to finance Hermione's research project, the only option she has left is the library at Malfoy Manor. She hasn't met Lucius since the war. What happens when she comes face to face with him again? And what has Snape to do with it all?

Many thanks to my lovely betas Anogete and Dacian Goddess.

JKR's, not mine.

~*~

Hermione read the same sentence again after having read it twice before. The words were clear enough, yet they failed to make any sense to her. She put the book down and glanced again at the parchment with her notes on it. She knew she had thought something when she wrote them down, though right now she couldn't remember what. She was tempted to peer at her watch again, but didn't dare for fear of Severus noticing something. For the third time within an hour, she stood up to walk over to one of the shelves. Picking up a book at random, she pretended to look for something. Relief came in the form of Tinky who popped her head in to announce that tea was served. The afternoon tea had become a cherished little ritual she shared daily with the two wizards.

As usual, the tea tray with the steaming teapot and the cups was sitting on the little side table when they arrived at the drawing room.

Hermione took a deep breath. 'Would you let me do the honours today?'

Lucius had been about to pour the tea; at Hermione's request, he took a step back. 'Of course.'

Hermione busied herself at the tray, making sure that the two men couldn't see what she was doing. The little vial was safely strapped to her arm hidden beneath the wide sleeve of her robes. Three drops would be more than enough. She watched as the clear liquid landed safely on the bottom of the cup, before pouring the hot tea over it. Thanks to having practiced it, she managed to wandlessly Evanesco the little vial while she put the milk in. With all evidence gone from her person, she turned around and handed Lucius his cup with a gracious smile. She then prepared Severus's tea and finally, her own. Now all she had to do was walk calmly over to the sofa and wait.

And then things began to take an unexpected turn. Lucius took a sip of his tea and made a face. Carefully, he tried again, obviously with the same result. Hermione went cold; the tea shouldn't have tasted any different. Severus looked at his friend. 'Is anything the matter?'

'I don't know. My tea tastes not like it should. Is yours all right?' he asked his guests.

Hermione hurried to say as innocent as she possibly could. 'Yes, it's excellent as usual.'

Severus nodded. 'There's nothing wrong with mine either.'

Lucius passed his cup to Snape. 'Severus, would you try it? Be careful as long as we don't know what is going on.'

Hermione sat very still, but she didn't say anything. Severus very carefully took a sip from Lucius's cup and tasted it. He spluttered. 'Lucius, I wouldn't drink that tea. It seems someone saw fit to spice it with a love potion.'

'So, it's not poisoned?' There was a palpable note of relief in Lucius's voice.

'That depends on how you look at the matter,' Severus answered.

Both men turned their eyes to Hermione. 'Miss Granger, you are awfully quiet. It seems such an intelligent and charming young lady would surely have an opinion on the matter?' Lucius almost purred.

Severus added. 'Yes, Miss Granger. I have to agree with Lucius; it seems rather odd that such a beautiful and clever young woman would not share her thoughts on the problem at hand.'

His eyes suddenly widened. 'I just remembered, I forgot something in my room,' he murmured as he hurried towards the door.

Hermione saw the way his dark gaze roamed over her body, and within a second made a life-altering decision. 'Actually, I'd rather you stayed.'

Severus stopped dead in his tracks and hesitated for a moment. Then he said smoothly, 'As you wish.'

Now Lucius was pouting. 'But I don't want to leave either. You put the potion in my tea.'

'Did I say that I wanted you to leave?'

'Oh, well in that case.' Lucius quickly moved to sit next to her.

As there was only room for two, Severus leant over the back of the sofa and whispered in Hermione's ear, 'If you are really certain, Miss Granger.'

If Hermione hadn't made up her mind already, his silky voice would have convinced her. 'I am certain, and don't you think you could be persuaded to call me Hermione, Severus?'

He placed a kiss next to her ear before he murmured, 'Yes, I think I could consider that option.'

Lucius, meanwhile, had begun to twirl one of Hermione's curls round his finger. 'Tea can be such a stimulating beverage, don't you think?' He slowly disentangled the finger and ran it down her throat and over the neckline of her robes.

'Yes, especially if blended with the right ingredients, don't you agree, Hermione?' Severus placed another kiss next to her ear.

Hermione swallowed, wondering for a fleeting moment if she was in way over her head with those two, but decided that having the undivided attention of the two most attractive men she knew was far too good to bother about things like "later" or "tomorrow". 'Tea is a wonderful thing,' she answered.

'Especially if it leads to more wonderful things.' Lucius busied himself with undoing the first buttons of Hermione's robes, exposing more of her cleavage and the black lace bra she had chosen for the occasion while Severus was slowly kissing his way down her neck, his hair falling forward over her exposed shoulder. Hermione gave a little sigh as nimble fingers proceeded to open her robes further while two mouths were busy placing kisses on her neck, her shoulders, and her throat.

Hermione stretched a little to give them better access and was rewarded with a quick swipe of Lucius's tongue along the rim of her bra, which drew another sigh from her. He kissed his way back up along her neck and her jaw, and then she felt soft lips pressing against her own. A pair of grey eyes that weren't cold at all looked at her. Hermione had the impression that it was getting very warm in the room as she touched her lips to his. One of her hands sneaked upward around the back of Lucius's head, drawing him closer to her. Her other hand searched and found one of Severus's. She laced her finger through his and held on to his hand before her tongue flicked out tentatively against Lucius's lips. He responded with a little moan and opened to her, his tongue meeting hers. Hermione raked her fingers through his long platinum blond hair. They took their time as their tongues got very well acquainted with each other, slowly deepening their kiss until they reluctantly parted.

Lucius drew back and pushed one of her bra straps down her shoulder. Hermione obediently raised her arm, so that he could slip it off. When she looked up, she found Severus's lips only inches from hers. Without hesitation, she touched his mouth with her own. His tongue swiftly darted out over her lips, and she quickly caught it in her mouth, making him whimper in surprise. She, too, let out a little whimper when she felt a finger brush over her nipple, then again until it was replaced by a hot mouth and a tongue swirling tantalisingly around it. Hermione moaned into Severus's mouth and started to push against Lucius. She was rewarded by one of his hands stroking down her belly, the sensation of which made her moan again.

Some time later, when Severus raised his head from her mouth, she heard Lucius order a bowl of strawberry jam. For once Hermione didn't give a damn about the elves as she was far too busy paying attention to the things Severus's mouth did to her neck. One of his hands pushed down the remaining bra strap and acquainted itself with her bared breast. Her nipple hardened instantly when he flicked his thumb over it. She let out a little sigh.

'Hermione, I have noticed that you seem to be rather fond of strawberry jam,' Lucius said.

'Mmmh,' she answered, feeling a finger coating her lips with something cool and sweet. She licked along them and then closed her lips around the finger, drawing it into her mouth. Hermione quickly swirled her tongue around it before she sucked the jam off, thoroughly. She was pleased to hear Lucius's slightly breathless moans.

When Hermione released Lucius's finger, Severus said, 'You are not the only one who likes sweet things.'

She smiled at him. 'Good.'

'But first we need to get rid of this.' Severus reached down and unclasped the bra behind Hermione's back. Both men took a moment to enjoy the view before Lucius dipped his finger into the bowl again and traced a red line down the side of Hermione's throat and over her collarbone. Severus leant over, drew his finger through the jam as well and proceeded to trace a similar pattern on the other side of Hermione's neck. The two wizards took their time to paint a pattern on her breasts, around her nipples and down her body despite her increasingly impatient wriggling.

Severus was working his way around her body and finally perched in front of her. 'These need to come off,' he remarked.

Hermione helpfully raised her hips so that he could pull her knickers down. Both men drew a deep breath at the sight of her now entirely naked body, and Hermione felt their gaze roam over her, causing more wriggling on her part. Admiration was nice, but right now she rather wished it would translate into action. She started to say something, but was stopped by a jam coated finger that demanded entrance into her mouth, which she granted happily.

Severus dipped this finger back into the bowl and traced intricate patterns over her lower belly and her thighs; soon he was assisted by a finger from the other side. They met as they put the finishing touches to their work between Hermione's legs. Feeling them exactly where she wanted them so urgently, she whimpered and pushed her hips up. When both fingers were withdrawn, she complained, 'Not fair,' and was met by two smiling faces.

'Beautiful,' Severus said.

'Exquisite,' Lucius added.

Then they bent down on either side of her and started to lick and nibble the jam off her body. Two hot mouths worked their way down her neck, over her shoulders and her arms. Extra time was spent on her breasts to make sure they caught every drop of the sweet. The sensation of two tongues swirling around her nipples nearly caused Hermione's senses to overload, with the sight of the two heads, one black, one silver blond, doing nothing to alleviate that. Her whimpers became more urgent as she felt them moving further down her body. When they reached her lower belly, the delightful sensation suddenly stopped.

She saw the two looking at each other for a moment, then Lucius began to kiss his way back up, while Severus took care of the last traces of jam on her thighs. She gasped as his tongue briefly flicked over her clit before he buried his face between her legs. Lucius meanwhile had turned his attention back to her breasts which caused her to buck against Severus. He put a hand on her hips to keep her still as he alternated between swirling around her clit and licking her in long strokes. Hermione gasped again when she felt his tongue enter her. With another swipe, he went back to the little nub and sucked at it while he slipped a finger into her, sending her spiralling into a whirl of pleasure.

When she came down from her peak, Severus had his head on her lower belly. Lucius had slipped an arm around her shoulders. They stayed like that for a moment until Severus got shakily to his feet. Lucius stood up as well and pulled Hermione up with him. She felt sticky and sweaty.

Upon seeing her discomfort, Lucius quickly pulled out his wand and cast Scourgify on her. Clean and much more comfortable, she noticed the interesting shapes both

wizards had acquired in front of their robes. She was about to do some exploring when Lucius pulled her to him. With his other arm, he reached out for Severus. 'Bed, I think,' he said softly.

~*~

They materialised upstairs in front of a large bed. By the looks of it, it was very old and comfortable. The covers obligingly flipped back and revealed finest white silk beneath them.

Hermione eagerly responded as Lucius lowered his head to hers for another kiss. She took a step back and leant against Severus, pulling Lucius with her. If she had had any doubt about their attraction to her, the pressure into her stomach and lower back would have convinced her otherwise. As it was, she found the sensation very intriguing, but she also wanted to look.

Hermione broke the kiss and quickly started to undo Lucius's robes and the white shirt underneath. When he moved his hands to help her, she stopped him. 'No, my turn,' she said, soothing her words with little kisses to his throat and down his chest.

Obligingly lowering his hands, he sighed as Hermione proceeded to explore the exposed flesh with her mouth and tongue. He tasted really nice, she thought, swirling her tongue around a pale pink nipple, which made the sighs turn into a moan. The other nipple proved to be equally tasty, so she bit down on it lightly. The moan became a sharp outdrawn hiss, and a hand tangled into her hair. Hermione leant against it and continued to lick and nibble her way across Lucius's chest.

Severus was still standing very close behind her. Looking over her shoulder, he took out his wand and pointed it at Lucius's feet. Without a sound, his shoes and socks vanished, leaving him barefoot.

'Nothing as embarrassing as a man in socks,' Severus whispered into Hermione's ear.

She smiled and rewarded him with a long and deep kiss that enabled their tongues to get thoroughly reacquainted with each other. When it ended, both were breathing heavily.

'Aren't you a bit overdressed for the occasion?' she asked and began to work at his many buttons that years ago had inspired so many fantasies.

Severus didn't say anything, just watched as she worked her way through his rows of buttons. When she had finally found her way through layers of cloth, she found him to be equally tasty as she placed hot, open-mouthed kisses on his chest. If his moans were any indication, he was also equally responsive.

Lucius had wrapped his arms around Hermione's middle; his hands had found her breasts. Cupping them, he ran his thumbs over her nipples.

Distracted by his touch, she looked up and found herself locked in an embrace with both of them, warm naked skin pressing against hers that left only one thought in her mind. She wanted more, wanted all of them.

Her fingers found the clasp of Severus trousers and opened it. She slipped her hand inside to touch hot, hard male flesh. As her fingers closed around him, Severus moaned.

Hermione used her free hand to pull his trousers and boxers down. Bared now to her eyes, she gently slid her hand up and down his length. He was fiery hot and twitched under her touch. When she looked at him, his dark eyes burned with an intense passion she had never seen there before.

Then he stopped her hands and drew her into another heated and urgent kiss, his tongue demanding entrance into her mouth. Hermione wasn't sure she understood it, but the knowledge that Lucius was watching them fuelled her own fire.

She turned around in their embrace and proceeded to uncover him completely as well. She raked her eyes over the length that stood out proudly and was pleased to notice that he looked even better than in her fantasies. She stroked him up and down, feeling every little detail under her greedy fingers.

Lucius encouraged her exploration by pulling her onto the bed, so that she was sprawled on top of him. His body was hot and hard underneath her, and she enjoyed the feeling of him pressing into her stomach. Hermione lowered her head to his chest and sucked one of his nipples into her mouth. In response, she felt him writhe under her.

She slowly trailed kisses over his hot skin, onto his flat belly, and down the patch of hair that descended from his navel. Sliding back, she knelt between his legs and gazed at his cock that was eagerly looking up at her.

The bed dipped slightly, and Hermione felt Severus's warm hands on her. He caressed her back and parted her hair to kiss the nape of her neck. The feeling of his hot lips on her skin made even more heat pool between her legs. She slid back until she could feel his body pressing into her, then she bent forward and trailed her tongue over Lucius's tip. The taste was salty, but not unpleasant. She licked along the underside before she closed her mouth around his length. With one of her hands, she fondled his balls until Lucius drew away from her.

Confused and a little hurt she looked at him; had she done anything wrong?

His eyes had become a stormy silver, but there was nothing but passion in them. 'That's not how I want you,' he said and pulled her up. He reached for her hips and guided her until she was placed over his erection. Hermione moaned at the feel of his tip at her entrance. Guided by his hands on her hips, she slowly took him inside her. His length inside her felt marvellous. Lucius pulled her forward into another kiss.

Severus's hands had moved lower on her back, and she felt a finger coated in a slick, cool liquid probing at her rear. It was an unusual, but not unpleasant sensation. The finger slowly entered her, and was then joined by another. She wasn't sure if she wanted Severus to continue what he was doing, but she didn't want him to stop either. Lucius held her tight to his chest. 'Relax, you'll enjoy this,' he whispered in her ear, distracting her with another kiss.

Severus's other hand sneaked between them and started to caress her between her legs causing waves of sensation to run through her. She pushed back against him and felt strangely empty when he withdrew his fingers, until she felt his cock covered by more of the slick liquid nudge at her. He entered her slowly and carefully, but still she gasped at the mixture of pleasure and pain his intrusion caused. 'Do you want me to stop?' Severus asked.

'No,' she answered. She wasn't sure what it was she was feeling, but she definitely did want him where he was.

When Severus was sheathed fully inside her, he stopped for a moment and kissed her neck again. Hermione enjoyed the feeling of being so thoroughly filled. When Lucius started to push slowly upward, she gasped again, this time with pleasure.

Then Severus started to move as well. Between them, the men quickly found a rhythm. Hermione felt them thrusting into her and felt more and more pleasure building deep down somewhere in her belly. It increased until she was screaming their names as she flew over a cliff and flew again. Beneath her, Lucius moaned at the pleasure of his own release, shortly after followed by Severus's.

They lay panting and content in a tangle of limbs, exchanging languid caresses without saying a word.

The night found them investigating more ways of enjoying each other until they all fell asleep in a boneless heap of satiation.

Six

Chapter 6 of 8

When the Ministry refuses to finance Hermione's research project, the only option she has left is the library at Malfoy Manor. She hasn't met Lucius since the war. What happens when she comes face to face with him again? And what has Snape to do with it all?

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JKR's, not mine.

~*~

Hermione woke up with a content little sigh. When had been the last time she had slept so well? She had had the most marvellous dream of Lucius; Severus had been there, too. *Really nice*, she thought as she snuggled back into the smooth soft pillow.

Hang on, since when did she own a pillowcase that felt like that? Suddenly very much awake, her eyes snapped open. She lay alone in a large unfamiliar bed under an equally unfamiliar duvet. Not a dream, then. If she had had any doubt as to last night's activities, her sore muscles confirmed that the dream had, in fact, not been a dream. Apparently, the potion had worked. For a moment she had the impulse to burrow deep under the duvet and wait for the world to pass her by. Unfortunately, she well knew that the world was not likely to do that.

She carefully swung her feet out of bed, only to realise that there were, indeed, a number of body parts that remembered last night. She looked around the room and saw that someone had brought up her clothes. Apparently, they had been cleaned as well, as they lay neatly pressed and folded on a chair nearby, together with a stack of the fluffiest towels she had ever seen. The dentist's daughter in her appreciated the new toothbrush that lay on top of them. The towels had also been spelled with a warming charm, Hermione discovered when she grabbed one and wound it round her middle. From last night, she vaguely remembered a bathroom with an obscenely large bathtub. Taking the stack of towels with her, she carefully padded across the corridor. Luckily, she found the bathroom behind the first door she tried. The bathtub was a welcome sight, though there were no taps to be found. Hermione was about to go back to retrieve her wand when the bathtub started to fill. She dipped a finger in to find that it was just the temperature she found pleasant. A closer inspection of the shelf above the tub showed a number of bottles apparently containing bubble baths and bath oils. None of it looked familiar, so she sniffed at a couple of them before she settled for one that smelled of roses.

After indulging for a while in the hot, pleasantly scented bath, pampering herself with a lotion of the same scent that had appeared after she had got out of the tub, brushing her teeth, and finally getting dressed, Hermione felt ready to face the day ahead.

She made her way downstairs and was greeted by Tinky who showed her to the dining room. She hadn't realised how hungry she was before she saw all the food on the table in the corner and smelled fried eggs and freshly brewed coffee. Coffee seemed like a wonderful idea. Unfortunately, there was already someone standing at the table pouring himself a cup.

At her entrance Severus turned around, his posture suddenly becoming rigid.

Hermione sighed. This was going to be even more difficult than she had expected. 'Good morning, Severus,' she said as brightly as she could manage.

'Hermione,' he answered.

'As you can see, breakfast is a rather casual affair round here,' he said, taking his cup and his plate back to the table and burying his face behind the *Daily Prophet*.

Hermione decided that now was as good a time as any, so rather than running from the room, she walked casually over to the table and inspected the food. She selected fried eggs, beans, and toast and poured herself a cup of coffee.

Sitting down at the table, she started to eat as if this was the most ordinary thing in the world; besides she really was hungry.

She managed to get down about two bites before she asked, 'Are you going to talk to me?'

She didn't get an answer until a considerable time later; Severus folded the newspaper and said, 'That was an interesting potion you used. The *Testimonium Amoris* am I correct?'

Hermione nodded. 'Yes, but I increased the dose of Ashwinder eggs to achieve the desired results if the requirements were met.' She was blushing again. Lately, this seemed to become an annoying habit of hers.

Severus raised an eyebrow. 'That is not a very common potion these days.'

'I found it in a book.'

A corner of Severus's mouth was curling upward. 'I suspected as much; it's not found in your standard potions book though.'

Hermione felt her face warm again. 'It was in a book I found in the library, or rather the book found me. It's a very old book without a title, and most of the pages are blank unless the book decides to open itself at a page and reveal its contents. I've checked it; it shows no sign of Dark Magic,' she added quickly.

Severus was looking at her very oddly. 'Did the book find you here in the library at the manor?'

'Yes, why?'

Severus's intense gaze held hers as he continued. 'That book is called *Ars Amatoria*; it is very rare and can only be found in the oldest pure-blood families or rather, in most cases, it cannot as it reveals itself only if it recognises someone who needs direction and clarification.'

Hermione said, 'But I didn't need direction.'

Severus raised an eyebrow. 'The pages the book shows its current owner will hold whatever the book thinks the reader needs, which in your case was the *Testimonium Amoris*.'

Hermione was puzzled. 'But I still don't understand why that potion.'

'The answer to that question is between you and the book. In ancient times this potion was often used by young women to test if their suitors were really in love with them or simply after their family's wealth. As you are aware, the potion will only work if the drinker already reciprocates the affection of the giver, otherwise nothing will happen, hence its name. Though usually its effects are not that intense.'

This time Hermione felt that she was definitely blushing.

'So, now you know,' Severus said.

'Now I know.' She looked at Severus who averted his gaze and suddenly seemed to find his empty coffee cup very interesting.

Hermione sighed. He probably felt hurt and betrayed, and she couldn't really blame him. Without the potion would he have ever let her know how he felt about her?

'Severus...'

'No. Let's leave it at that.' With that he stood up and left.

Hermione stared after him, shocked by the stricken look on his face.

Then she remembered the things Harry had told her. How Severus a long time ago had been in love with his mum. Harry hadn't said much else, but Hermione had gathered that it hadn't ended well. She also had the sneaking suspicion Lily hadn't been quite the saint a lot of people made her out to be, though that was something she would never tell Harry. She buried her face in her arms. What had she done?

She sat for a while before she went in search of Severus. She had no idea where to look so she went to the first place that came to her mind. When she opened the door to the library, she was glad to find him in his usual spot.

'Severus?' She walked slowly over to the table, coming to stand next to him.

'I am working.' He didn't even look up from his book.

Hermione squinted at the title of the book. 'No, you are not. This is a book on the care of owls for Merlin's sake. Unless you are looking for a new profession, I'd say you are prevaricating.'

Severus snapped the book shut. 'Right, what is it then?'

Hermione simply bent forward and touched her lips to his. Apparently, she had caught him by surprise because he didn't draw back.

Hermione continued what she was doing, lightly running her tongue over his bottom lip, until he responded to her kiss. He brought his arms up around her and pulled her onto his lap. Some time later she said softly, 'Will you listen to me now?'

'It seems I don't have much of a choice.'

Hermione threaded her fingers through his black strands as she went on. 'You...that came as a bit of a surprise. A very nice surprise. And...and I asked you to stay because I wanted you there. And I don't think I want to let you go.'

In response, Severus drew her closer and kissed her again...and again.

They remained lost in each other's kiss until Severus's fingers found their way inside Hermione's robes. Hearing her appreciative little whimper, he proceeded to open them. He looked for a long time at the scar on her neck until Hermione was becoming uncomfortable under his scrutinising gaze. To distract him, she began on his countless buttons until she could reach his neck where she inspected his scar now. Bending forward, she kissed the whole length of it and then went on to devote similar attention to the other parts of him she uncovered. Severus, meanwhile, had shifted his concentration from her neck to her breasts much to Hermione's appreciation. He bared them and stroked the sensitive nipples with his thumb, causing Hermione to gasp and rock against him.

Their tender exploration of each other quickly turned into urgent need that had them lose most of their clothes in the process. Severus set Hermione on her feet and stood up as well, nudging her toward the table. They embraced again, and Severus pushed her gently backward until she lay with her back on the table. Hermione eagerly reached out for him, wanting to feel his hands and his mouth on her again. His lean body was hot to her touch as she felt him on top of her. He kissed her again while his erection nudged at her entrance. She willingly opened her legs further, welcoming his length inside of her. Severus moaned into her neck and started to thrust forward. Hermione stroked her hands along his back. Meeting his thrusts, she kissed him passionately, bringing them both ever closer until they tumbled into a world of sensation, colour, and light.

They lay calmly for a while, content in each other's embrace until they scrambled off the table and made it over to the little couch in the corner.

Hermione lay snuggled up against him, his arm around her waist. 'Lucius and you...' She let her question trail out.

'We are friends.'

That was not what it had looked like last night. 'And lovers?'

'Yes...does it bother you?'

She remembered what she had seen last night, and a familiar tingle spread out from her lower stomach. 'No. Do you think you could find room for me as well?'

'It seems we already did.' Severus chuckled softly into her ear. At the unfamiliar sound, Hermione looked up at him. It was a very nice sound, but there was something else she wanted to know.

Severus sighed. 'I can see another question in your ever inquisitive mind. So, why don't you just ask?'

Hermione hesitated. Snuggling a bit closer to Severus she asked, 'Does it... does it turn you on? Seeing Lucius and I, you know.'

Severus said softly. 'Yes, it does. You two look very enticing together.'

She smiled at the images his sentence invoked. 'I like seeing you with him as well.'

In response Severus pulled her even closer to him and just kept holding her. It was nice, just lying in his warm embrace, Hermione thought as she dozed off.

When she opened her eyes again, it was a welcome sight to find Severus smiling at her, but something else kept nagging at her mind. 'Do you think he's very angry?'

Severus started to play with her curls as he answered. 'It's hard to say with Lucius. He obviously enjoyed last night, and what you did is just the kind of thing he would appreciate, but seeing that he was on the receiving end of it, he might be a tad miffed.'

Hermione sighed. 'Right, I think I better go and find him.'

~*~

Hermione found Lucius in his study when she tentatively knocked at the door.

'Good morning, Miss Granger, did you rest well?' Lucius looked up from the papers on his desk.

'Yes, thank you and thanks for the towels and everything.'

'My pleasure,' he said returning his attention to the parchment in front of him.

'Are you angry with me?' Hermione blurted out. Admittedly not the most subtle approach, but she just wanted to get this over with and the whole mess sorted out.

Lucius's eyebrows went ever so slightly upward. 'No, Miss Granger. It was very entertaining, and you showed an admirable cunning. It also reminded me to be more wary of my guests in the future.'

Entertaining. Hermione stared at him, trying to blend out the memory of what was under those impeccable robes. It didn't work. If anyone asked, she would say that and his smooth, polished, calm demeanour were responsible for what she did next.

She pulled out her wand, aimed it at the paper bin in the corner, and watched with satisfaction as it exploded. Having Lucius's full attention now, she leant over his desk, shoved her wand under his chin and yelled, 'You are the most infuriating, arrogant bastard I've ever met, and frankly, I have no idea why I even like you!'

She saw Lucius's hand twitch in the direction of his own wand for a second before he thought better of it and said, 'Now, let's not overreact. Why don't we talk about this calmly?'

Hermione didn't move her wand. 'Go on, then. I am listening.'

'I'd prefer not to talk at wandpoint. Why don't we do this over a nice cup of tea?'

Hermione ever so slowly lowered her wand but kept it in her hand. 'All right.'

Lucius relaxed visibly. 'On second thought, let's make it a cup of coffee. And you are not handling it.'

'Coffee's fine with me.'

Lucius ordered the coffee from another elf, and they settled down on the couch.

'Dosing someone with a lust potion is a strange way of showing your affection,' Lucius said.

'I thought you'd never notice me anyway because I am Muggle-born.'

'It would be very hard not to notice you, and besides, I have found that all this emphasis on blood is overrated. Just look at the people running the Ministry now, all pure-bloods and incompetent fools.'

Hermione edged a bit closer to him. 'It wasn't that kind of potion. I used a spiced up version of the *Testimonium Amoris*.'

Now Lucius looked at her, his silver eyes warm with interest and something else. 'That is a very rare potion. It's usually only used to determine if one's affection is reciprocated.'

'That's why I used it.'

An arm found its way around her shoulders. 'I see. And how does Severus fit into this?'

'I hadn't planned that, but I am very glad it turned out that way.'

'As am I.' With that, Lucius drew her into a kiss.

Hermione enjoyed the feeling of his lips on hers, but there was still something on her mind. 'And while we are at it, do something about the way you treat your elves. It's abominable.'

His reconciliation kiss so rudely interrupted, Lucius stared at her. 'The way I treat my elves?'

'Yes, don't you see how afraid they always are.'

Now Lucius started to smile. 'Much as I'd like to take credit for that, it's not me they fear, at least no more than they ought to. It's you.'

'Me?'

Lucius was smirking now. 'You see, your reputation precedes you. They are afraid you might present them with clothes.'

'But that was years ago.' Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing.

'House-elves have long memories. Mine, on the other hand, is woefully short when it comes to certain things, so I would appreciate it if you could help me to refresh it.' Lucius pulled her close to him again and pressed his mouth on hers, more insistently this time. They spent a pleasant morning as their bodies remembered each other.

~*~

A few weeks later, Hermione was sifting through the things that had piled up on the desk in her office to determine what needed her attention and what could wait when a bright orange memo landed flapping on a stack of parchments. Whoever had thought up that obnoxious colour coding of the memos, choosing orange for those of the highest priority, deserved to live with an excess of that colour for the rest of their life in her opinion. On the other hand, seeing who ruled the Ministry now, they probably already did. The memo let her know that she was to report to Undersecretary Percy Weasley at once.

Percy resided on the fifth floor. The plaque on his door read "*Percy Weasley, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister; Head of the Department of International Cooperation.*" It was well-lighted and about four times as large as the drab little cubicle Hermione shared with Susan.

'Ah, Miss Granger, thank you for coming. Do take a seat. I am afraid I have rather bad news for you.'

At his words, Hermione felt a tight little ball curl up and start to bounce around in her stomach.

Percy continued. 'Due to the upcoming elections, we will be in need of all employees at the Ministry, therefore I am sorry to inform you we will have to terminate your leave.'

The ball in her stomach was growing. 'I understand. When?'

'As of today. We expect you back here on Monday. We also feel that your abilities would qualify you better for another department. Please report to Mr Macmillan at Broom Regulatory Control at nine a.m. on Monday morning. That is all. Thank you, Miss Granger.'

She felt completely numb as she went back to her office. The ball in her stomach had turned into lead that was slowly sinking down.

~*~

A/N: Ars Amatoria ...The Art of Love

Testimonium Amoris ... Proof of Love

Seven

Chapter 7 of 8

When the Ministry refuses to finance Hermione's research project, the only option she has left is the library at Malfoy Manor. She hasn't met Lucius since the war. What happens when she comes face to face with him again? And what has Snape to do with it all?

Many thanks to my lovely betas Anogete and Dacian Goddess.

JKR's, not mine.

~*~

Hermione sat in her armchair, a purring Crookshanks in her lap. She didn't know how long she had been staring out of the window without really seeing anything. Come Monday, she would be checking the amount of twigs on brooms' tails instead of doing research on ancient curses. Which also meant she wouldn't be able to spend her days in the library at Malfoy Manor anymore. Recently, she was also spending most of her nights there, though not in the library. A broad smile appeared on her face as she thought of those nights, and a wistful sigh escaped her lips. The purring in her lap stopped, and a puzzled half-kneazle looked up at the odd noise.

Hermione continued to look out of the window. Something needed to be done, but she would need help.

She didn't bother with a cloak, picked up Crookshanks and Disapparated.

~*~

As usual, Tinky showed up immediately at Hermione's arrival. 'Good evening, miss.'

'Good evening, Tinky.' Lately, the elves had become much more relaxed around her. She suspected Lucius had let them know with a few well chosen words that it wasn't Hermione they had to fear if their behaviour didn't change.

Crookshanks immediately disappeared to one of his favourites spots when she set him down. He obviously had no qualms about spending most of his time at the manor. Hermione had also been glad to see that his Kneazle instincts approved of Severus and Lucius.

As usual, she found both men in the library. These days all of them spent most of their evenings there. As Severus had pointed out, it was so much more practical when one had all the books at hand instead of carrying them to and fro all the time. Lucius said the armchairs were more comfortable than those in the drawing room, though Hermione thought he simply got bored as she and Severus often worked until late into the night. Not that Lucius would ever admit to such a mundane thing as boredom.

Tonight, the two wizards were lounging around the little table that stood near the fireplace. Apparently, Tinky had announced her; when she joined them, she found a glass of dark red wine waiting and a black and a grey pair of eyes looking at her with warmth and interest.

She gave them both a hug and a kiss before she sat down and took a sip of the tasty wine. Severus narrowed his eyes. 'Why do I have the impression that things were not well at the office?'

She was still easily surprised by his perceptiveness; sometimes she had the impression he could read her like a book. Given the fact that he was an excellent Legilimens, he probably could. 'Because they are not. The sodding Ministry has decided to terminate my leave. So that's the official end of my research, and they're relegating me to Broom Control.'

'Broom Control? That's the Ministry's equivalent to Coventry. Someone really wants you out of the way,' Lucius said, twirling the stem of his glass in his long elegant fingers.

Hermione stared mesmerised at his fingers before she continued, 'Someone definitely doesn't want me to do what I am doing.'

'So, if you followed their wishes, that would be the end of your research and ergo your career,' Severus said.

'Which, if my guess is correct, you have no intention of doing,' Lucius added.

'Of course not,' Hermione answered.

'So, what do you intend to do?'

'I don't know yet. Apart from finishing my book, obviously. I was wondering if you could help me to do a little brainstorming.'

Lucius smiled. It was the sort of smile that had made even his fellow Death Eaters wary. 'Let's map out the territory first. What's the official reason for calling you back?'

'All the employees are needed because of the upcoming elections,' Hermione quoted; it didn't sound any more likely the second time around.

Severus had started pacing in front of the fireplace. 'That is so obviously a pretext that they either think you're completely daft, or they want you to know it is a pretext. While I wouldn't discount the first possibility, my bet would be on the latter.'

Hermione nodded. 'I agree, especially together with the transfer.'

'Did anyone bother to give you an official reason for that?'

Hermione snorted. 'Oh yes, apparently, I'm better qualified for that job.'

Both men grinned; Severus said, 'I see how measuring broomsticks would allow you to exercise all your mental capability.'

'Indeed.'

'Who are your enemies? Whoever is out to get you would have to be relatively high up in order to influence committees and instigate transfers,' Lucius pointed out.

Hermione had already known that he was an excellent strategist, but for the first time, she had the occasion to admire the real extent of his considerable intelligence.

'A number of people, actually. Most of the Weasleys, including those outside the Ministry, especially Percy, Ginny, and Fleur, but also Arthur if he listens to Molly, which he certainly does. Ernie Macmillan and his Hufflepuff clique.'

Lucius looked at her. 'That is an impressive list. Any reason for that other than that they're a bunch of imbeciles?'

'Let me see. I disagree with Molly on motherhood and the role of women; I disagree with Percy on politics; I disagree with George on his methods of doing business; I disagree with Ginny on most everything; and, oh right, I dumped Ron.'

The corners of Severus's mouth twitched visibly. 'All commendable reasons. But why Macmillan?'

'I refused to go out with him.'

Hermione could see Lucius thinking. 'So, virtually everyone who right now holds a key position at the Ministry is your enemy.'

Hermione nodded. 'Not to mention that George and Bill have a lot of influence outside the Ministry.'

'That might change. Who are your friends?'

'Outside the Ministry? Luna Lovegood, you know the editor of *The Quibbler*, Minerva McGonagall. On the inside, definitely Harry. Probably Kingsley.' Hermione couldn't think of any more people at the Ministry who might be on her side.

'Good, that means we have at least one newspaper at our disposal. An ally at Hogwarts is good as well.'

'Potter? I thought he was engaged to the Weasley girl?'' Severus interjected.

'They split up, and as Ginny made it abundantly clear that she was the wronged party, Harry isn't the Weasleys' most favourite person at the moment,' Hermione explained.

Lucius said, 'If we can't do much from within the Ministry, we will have to thwart the elections.'

Hermione stared at him. 'You make it sound so easy.'

'It is easy if you know how to do it.' There was that smile again, and the temperature in the room dropped several degrees.

'What we need is someone to stand against Arthur,' Severus said.

'Hm, the most obvious candidate would be Kingsley. He fought against Voldemort, he did well when he was Minister before, and despite the rubbish in the *Daily Prophet*, he is still well-known and popular. Do you think he could be persuaded?' Hermione asked.

'Everyone can be persuaded if the price is right or the threat is fierce enough. Kingsley seems like a good choice.' Lucius picked up his wineglass again; seeing that it was empty, he quickly Accioed the bottle and topped up the others' glasses as well.

Severus had resumed his pacing. Hermione noticed he often did that when he was thinking. She liked watching him; he moved with graceful strength without making a noise. 'Would Narcissa help?' he asked.

'If it brings her husband prestige? Definitely,' Lucius replied.

Hermione couldn't help a twinge of jealousy at the mention of Narcissa. She knew that Lucius didn't love her anymore. He had told her about their divorce; they had parted amicably which again was something she wouldn't have thought him capable of when she first came to his house. Still, the thought of the elegant society woman, who was so different from her, made Hermione uneasy.

Severus came to sit on the armrest of Hermione's chair and started to play with her curls. 'Narcissa is a notable ally.'

In response, Hermione leaned back into his touch. 'So, we persuade Kingsley, thwart Arthur's campaign, make sure that Kingsley wins the elections, and thereby end the Weasley reign. Is that it?'

Lucius came to perch on the other armrest. 'In a nutshell, yes, though the actual thing might require a few more moves in between. In any case, it will be highly entertaining. Speaking of which...' With these words he bent over and kissed Severus.

Hermione felt a familiar heat spread through her body as she watched them. She never got tired of seeing them together. They looked so beautiful, silver and black, light and dark.

~*~

Lucius had arranged a little informal soiree. It just so happened that all the guests were supporting Kingsley in the upcoming election.

Hermione was turning back and forth in front of the large mirror. She adjusted the neckline of her robes again, then twirled the lock that she had taken out of the bun at the nape of her neck to frame her face around her finger once more. She turned again to see the fall of her robes.

'Hermione, give it a rest. You look perfect.' Severus had come to stand behind her. He put his arms round her middle and let his head rest for a moment on her shoulder.

Hermione leaned back against him and smiled at the image she saw in the glass. 'As do you.'

'Come on, let's go downstairs; it's time.'

'Don't you think we should wait a few more minutes?' She tried to catch a look at the fall of her robes again.

'Hermione, you have nothing to worry about. Narcissa needs your help in the election, so she will be perfectly nice. And besides, Lucius has never looked at Narcissa the way he looks at you.'

Suddenly another thought struck Hermione. 'And you?'

Severus stared at her for a moment before he caught on. 'No.'

He pulled Hermione close to him and said softly, 'In my life I have cared about exactly three people. Two of which are here tonight, and Narcissa isn't one of them.'

~*~

Despite Severus's attempts to reassure her, Hermione's knees felt wobbly as they went downstairs to greet the guests. Her legs started to feel a bit steadier when all her friends were obviously happy to see her. If any of them wondered why she looked suspiciously like tonight's hostess, none of them mentioned it.

Narcissa arrived at Kingsley's arm, looking very beautiful in an aloof way. Hermione noticed the other woman sizing her up and resisted the urge to tug at an invisible crease in her sleeve. Instead, she returned the favour by looking Narcissa over in the same manner. Two could play at this game. Hermione smiled. 'Mrs Shacklebolt. What a pleasure to see you. You look beautiful.'

If Narcissa caught the emphasis Hermione had put on her name, she didn't show it. 'Thank you, the pleasure is all mine. You look lovely, too.'

The pleasantries over, Hermione was free to enjoy the evening and set her part of the schemes in motion. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Harry and Draco greeting each other. That was another meeting that needed to be monitored. Old rivalries and petty jealousies could all too easily become vital flaws in their plan. As she watched more closely, she noticed them standing there, looking at each other as if they were meeting for the first time, with expressions of utter rapture on their faces. Hermione started to grin; they didn't seem to need her intervention there, after all. In another corner, she saw Severus talking to Minerva. It had taken a lot of persuasion for the Headmistress to even accept the invitation for tonight, so there was work to be done. Hermione went to join them and thought that it would be nice to be as lively and fierce as the older woman when she reached Minerva's age.

~*~

After a long chat with Luna about the role of Nargles in politics, Hermione noticed that Harry and Draco were still standing in the same spot, talking. Her curiosity getting the better of her, she walked over to them. They abruptly became silent.

Harry suddenly looked sheepish. 'Erm, Hermione, is there something going on between you and Snape?'

'Yes.'

Draco raised an eyebrow in an exact imitation of Lucius. 'I had the impression there was something between you and my father.'

'Yes,' Hermione said calmly, waiting for what would happen next.

She thought she could see tiny wheels spurring in their brains as both men stared at her. The silence lasted for a few minutes until Harry said tentatively, 'I see... I think. Are you happy?'

'Very.'

Harry only nodded, her reassurance apparently enough for him.

Draco was still staring at her. 'Wow, Granger. Who'd have thought you had it in you.'

'Life is full of surprises, Malfoy.'

Draco started to smile; it was the first genuine smile Hermione had ever seen from him. 'Don't I know it.'

~*~

After the last guests had left, three tired people trudged up the stairs to their rooms. They had never talked about it, but one day Hermione had found a guestroom prepared for her.

Since then, again without anyone ever acknowledging it, it had become "Hermione's room." Having a place of her own in the big manor house meant a lot to Hermione, though the only one who ever slept there was Crookshanks.

Hermione took a shower, slipped on her nightshirt, and contemplated the bed for a moment. Then she pulled the nightie off again, wrapped herself in her nightgown, and left for the master bedroom.

~*~

Lucius was already in bed, reading a book. As usual, he wasn't wearing anything; he preferred to sleep in the nude. Hermione found that to be a rather practical habit.

At her entrance, Lucius looked up. Hermione walked over to the bed and let the nightgown slip off her shoulders before she sat down. Lucius slipped back the duvet and pulled her into a kiss. As she felt his mouth close on hers and his warm body beneath her, she noticed that she had his full attention in every sense. Lucius pulled her hair back from her face and slowly licked a trail down the side of her neck. Encouraging her to glide a bit further up his torso, he took one of her nipples into his mouth. The feeling of his hot, wet mouth on her skin made Hermione whimper. He gave the other breast the same attention. When he released it, Hermione bent forward and started to kiss her way down his throat and his chest. Sliding slowly down, she left a trail of warm wetness on his skin as she returned the favour to his nipples until he made the most delectable noises.

In the back of her mind, she heard a door click and knew that Severus had come in. The knowledge that he was watching them incited more fiery heat in her lower belly that raced all through her body.

Following a trail of light hair, she kissed her way further down until she knelt between Lucius's legs. She smiled at the sight that greeted her, then bent forward and took him into her mouth. He moaned with pleasure as she alternatively licked and sucked.

The caresses of warm hands on her back informed her that Severus had joined them. His hands moved around and cupped her breasts before he tweaked her nipples between thumb and forefinger, causing her to gasp in appreciation.

Severus's hand trailed further down. In response to his caresses Hermione spread her legs further, wanting him inside her. He complied by slowly entering her. When he was fully sheathed, he just remained still. He felt good inside her, but Hermione wanted him to move and pushed back against him. He responded with slow languid thrusts, making her gasp around Lucius's cock. That was just what it took for Lucius; he moaned again and hot liquid filled her mouth.

She kept him in her mouth until he withdrew. Severus pulled her up against him and started to thrust harder and deeper. The new angle felt even better as they created a rhythm until Hermione screamed his name in pleasure when she took him with her.

When she had found her breath again, Lucius reached up and pulled her into his arms while Severus snuggled up to her back. Lying between her two wizards, Hermione fell asleep with a happy smile on her face.

Eight

Chapter 8 of 8

When the Ministry refuses to finance Hermione's research project, the only option she has left is the library at Malfoy Manor. She hasn't met Lucius since the war. What happens when she comes face to face with him again? And what has Snape to do with it all?

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JKR's, not mine.

~*~

Hermione stood in the doorway to the Ministry's ballroom, flanked by Severus and Lucius. Her pale pink dress robes were adorned with a few chosen pieces of jewellery and matched the dark grey and the black that the two men at her side were wearing perfectly.

As they walked inside, she let her eyes sweep through the large hall. Narcissa had created the scheme for the decoration, and Hermione had to admit that it looked perfect. The predominant colour of the room was white, softened by a generous assortment of summer flowers. Silver candelabras and roses ranging from pale yellow to dark red decorated the tables. The walls were adorned by climbing roses in the same colour range, filling the whole hall with their scent. The ceiling had been enchanted to look exactly like the sky outside, as it was slowly moving from dusk into the night. Hermione noticed a number of small lanterns that were floating beneath the ceiling and would provide light later on. She had the impression they had just entered a large magical garden instead of an underground ballroom.

Kingsley and Narcissa came to greet them. For the first time Hermione genuinely smiled at the other woman. 'This is wonderful.'

Narcissa was visibly pleased with her compliment. 'Thank you. The occasion called for something sufficiently festive.'

Kingsley and Narcissa needed to attend to new guests who had just arrived. As they were leaving, Narcissa turned once more to Hermione and said, 'Do take care of my garden, Miss Granger, will you?'

'I will. I promise,' Hermione answered, surprised by Narcissa's acknowledgement, or was that a blessing? In any case it was nice.

Severus looked after them. 'That was a very clever move of Kingsley, to choose the tenth anniversary of Voldemort's downfall as the day of his inauguration as Minister.'

Lucius nodded. 'Of course it was very clever. I suggested it.'

They walked around the room, searching for their table. Hermione smiled when she saw everybody who was anybody there. The occasion forced even those who didn't support Kingsley to attend in order to celebrate the decade of peace and honour those who had lost their lives in the fight against Voldemort. Lucius was truly ingenious when it came to these things. So was Severus, Hermione thought, looking at them.

Molly hissed at them as they passed the Weasley table. 'It's a disgrace.'

'Yes, isn't it?' Lucius agreed politely as he walked on, leaving her to work out what he had just said.

Hermione briefly glanced at the table holding the large number of redheads. 'You know, one could almost feel sorry for them.'

Lucius shrugged. 'One almost could, but they'll recover. That sort always does.'

Ginny chose that moment to walk over to them. 'You bitch! It's all your fault. You dried-up spinster with your damn books. You'll be sorry for this, I promise.'

Hermione tried to calm her down. 'Ginny, don't...'

But Ginny didn't listen. 'I know you are behind this. My brother wasn't good enough for you. You spun lies about my family. You and your Death Eaters, you slut,' she shrieked and pulled out her wand.

Before she could do anything, Severus looked intently at her wand, and it flew out of her hand. He caught it swiftly. 'Miss Weasley, I strongly suggest you do not make a scene.'

Now, Ginny rounded on him. 'Give me back my wand. I hate you, you—'

Severus just waved his hand in a wordless and wandless Silencio and effectively shut Ginny up. He stalked over to the Weasley table, dropped her wand right in the middle of it, and walked away as if nothing had happened, leaving Ginny standing in the middle of the hall.

Lucius and Hermione followed him to their table.

Severus looked at Hermione, concern in his eyes. 'Are you all right?'

'I'm fine. But I take back what I said earlier. I'm most definitely not sorry.'

Lucius smiled. 'Good, besides it's not your fault that evidence pointed to Arthur Weasley in the embezzlement of funds and that he subsequently lost his popularity.'

'You are right. I was as shocked as everybody else when I read about it.'

Severus said, 'Better remember that, if Potter ever asks.'

It turned out that Harry and Draco shared their table. Hermione gave her friend a hug. 'Harry, it's good to see you.'

'It's good to see you too, and congratulations on publishing your first book.'

'Thank you.'

Harry grinned and inclined his head toward the Weasley table. 'Heard you had a chat with an old friend.'

'Yes, it's always nice to catch up.'

After a sumptuous dinner, the dead were honoured, and then it was time for Kingsley to officially take over as Minister for Magic.

His inauguration speech had exactly the right length to ensure that everybody knew he was important enough now to be allowed to bore them, but was short enough not to spoil the mood of the occasion. Hermione was pleased to hear Harry named as Kingsley's successor as Head of the Auror Department, but she was even more pleased to see Draco take Harry's hand at the announcement.

The rest of the night passed uneventfully with drinks, a bit of dancing, a few more attempts of a Weasley having words with someone who wasn't inclined to listen, and yet more drinks until Hermione, Severus, and Lucius decided that it had been a wonderful party and that it was time to go home.

~*~

Hermione opened her eyes and squinted at the sun that was finding its way through a chink in the curtains. It felt very early. Definitely too early to get up. She stretched and settled back into Severus's arms, her head on his chest. Behind her, Lucius stirred briefly, obviously came to a similar conclusion regarding the time of day, and snuggled against her back, his arm wrapped around her middle and his hair falling over her shoulder. The tickling sunbeam on her nose made her smile as she drifted back to sleep with her two wizards at her side.

~fin~