

Blond and Awkward

by Mischief Unlimited

A pool table, a klutz, and a conversation. You only *thought* you knew Lucius Malfoy.

A Peculiar Business

Chapter 1 of 4

A pool table, a klutz, and a conversation. You only *thought* you knew Lucius Malfoy.

A Peculiar Business

Disclaimer: We do not own it.

"Good week?" Severus asked Lucius as the barkeep served their ordered drinks of lager.

Lucius shrugged. "Same as always. Rather uneventful."

Severus stared at his friend, not sure whether to be amused or concerned about his friend's answer. "What? No gorgeous blonde for entertainment?"

Lucius responded with a non-committal grunt.

Severus's attention was diverted by a young woman entering the pub.

"Severus! Don't you have a beauty at home waiting for you?" Lucius asked, following his friend's eyes.

"Who? Hermione? Since when do you think Hermione is a beauty? And we broke up weeks ago."

"What? I only saw the two of you together last Monday."

"So? Just because we don't sleep with each other doesn't mean we aren't friends, Lucius."

Lucius remained silent for a while.

"And you didn't answer the question. Since when do you think Hermione's a beauty?"

Lucius fidgeted slightly. "You know, regardless of blood status, I can see she has a lot to offer. She is one uniquely exquisite woman."

"She's not even your type." He shook his head in disbelief.

"So? She doesn't have to be anyone's type to be appreciated." His hand went for the glass, but knocked it accidentally over.

"*Evanesco*," Severus murmured.

"So... are you saying she's available?"

Many a student from Hogwarts would have paid good, hard Galleons to see Severus Snape gaping like a clownfish, completely gobsmacked.

"I'm sorry, I don't believe I heard you correctly. Did you just ask if Hermione Granger is *available*?"

"Do you think she'll go out with me?"

Severus stared. Lucius backed away as Severus pulled out his wand.

"*Cognosco*." Severus shook his head again. "Damn. It *is* you," he muttered. "I could have sworn someone Polyjuiced you." His eyes wandered around and widened in surprise when he spotted Hermione, who was making a beeline for his table.

"Hi. I thought I might find you here," she said. "I found the book you were looking for." She pulled out a copy of Arthur C Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and handed it to him. "Hello, Mr Malfoy. I didn't expect to see you here," she said politely.

"Yes, I challenged Lucius for a game of billiards, which we were about to begin. Care to join us?"

"Mr. Malfoy plays pool?"

"Not very well, I assure you."

"So maybe he and I should team up?"

Severus smirked smugly. "That would probably be wise."

Severus led the way to the games room, inserted the pound coin into the table...his and Hermione's favorite...and set up the balls as they came tumbling out on the side.

"Do you want to break or shall I?"

"Ladies first," Severus said and glanced at Lucius, who looked like a fish out of water. He took pity on the man and handed him one of the cues. "Now, wait your turn."

His cane in one hand, Lucius took the cue with the other. "Put your cane down," Severus instructed. "It helps to have both hands free when playing pool."

Lucius leaned the cane against a small table. It fell to the floor, clinking. "Damn," he mumbled and picked it up. He tried the chair. It slid down with another clink.

Severus rolled his eyes, picked up the cane and placed it on the floor flush against the wall.

"Thanks," Lucius murmured.

Hermione expertly broke and immediately sunk two solids. She sank a third before it was Severus's turn. While he lined up his angle, she looked curiously at Lucius.

"You're awfully quiet today, Mr Malfoy. No jokes on how many Mudbloods it takes to screw in a light bulb?"

"I..." Lucius was interrupted from whatever he was going to say by Severus.

"Your turn, Lucius."

"Chalk your tip, Mr. Malfoy."

"Er... what?"

Hermione picked up a small blue cube and rubbed it on the end of Lucius's stick.

"Oh. Right. Thank you."

He lined up his angle on the table shot and tried his best. The cue marginally hit the cue-ball, which moved a quarter of an inch in the opposite direction of the nearest solid.

Severus gauged the angle, aimed the cue-ball at the red stripe, and sunk it. Next, he managed to sink the blue stripe before failing to get the green one in. He nodded at Hermione.

Her face showing deep concentration as she lined up her angle, she hit the cue-ball and sunk another two solids. "Yes!"

"How did you learn this, Miss Granger?" Lucius asked.

Hermione smirked. "Oh, my dad used to take me to the pub every Sunday..." When she saw his horrified look, she amended quickly, "Just joking! It's a kind of thing every Muggle teen learns at one time or another. After Voldemort fell, Ron, Harry, and I went on a few pub crawls in the Muggle world to escape the reporters and played quite a bit of pool."

Lucius turned to Severus. "And you?"

"My father really *did* take me to the pub every Sunday."

Lucius flushed. "Oh."

When it came time for Hermione to continue, Lucius leaned over to Severus and asked, "What's a light bulb?"

Severus sighed. "I'll tell you later."

The game continued, and Lucius's next turn was a disaster. He popped the cue ball off the table and snagged the felt with his cue.

"Oi! What're you doing over there?" the barkeep shouted indignantly.

"Sorry, sorry. I'll pay for any damage," Hermione called.

The game concluded, and two more followed. Lucius and Hermione took the series...best out of five...thanks mainly to Hermione's skill.

Lucius bent down to pick up his cane, tripped over it, and fell into Severus, who adroitly caught him and spun him towards the door.

"I'll be by the Manor later, Lucius, so that we can finish that discussion we were having earlier."

"I look forward to it, Severus. Thank you for the game, Miss Granger. It was most educational." Severus shoved him out the door before Hermione could respond.

Hermione looked at Severus curiously. "That was very odd."

"You have no idea."

Hermione pummeled Severus with questions about Lucius's behavior until he finally told her he had an appointment at the Muggle VD clinic to get away from her. It was worth the slap just to escape.

Glad a house-elf was present to take his jacket, Severus followed the creature to the drawing room.

"Severus! So glad you made it," Lucius greeted him and went to the cabinet to prepare drinks for the two men. "Same as usual?"

"Gin and tonic works for me," Severus confirmed.

Lucius headed for the door.

"Lucius, where are you going? Do you not have house-elves to bring the tonic from the ice box?" Severus shook his head at his friend.

Lucius stared at him as he fumbled around with the crystal decanter. "She doesn't like the idea of using house-elves, does she?"

"Hermione?"

"Yes, yes. Doesn't she have this thing about house-elves? Draco spent an entire summer holiday snickering about it."

Severus decided it was time to get to the bottom of Lucius's questions. "What exactly is your interest in her?"

Lucius looked taken aback. "That's a rather Gryffindor approach. Nothing untoward, I assure you."

Severus growled. "Listen to me, Lucius. She is not one of your vapid trophy women who will be blinded by your looks and charm. She is not someone to play games with; I will not allow it. We may not be a couple any longer, but I will not let you toy with her."

Lucius squirmed a bit under Severus's gaze, but finally decided that he would be better off just telling the truth. "Since Narcissa left with that idiot Dimitri, I've found the manor overrun by women of the same mould: self-centered, arrogant, brainless chits, who are only interested in the latest fashion and wizarding affairs.

"I've been watching you and Hermione together and found it to be the opposite of what I've been experiencing. You always have interesting conversations, animated even, and she seems to be as genuinely interested in you as you are in her."

Silence followed Lucius's words until he hesitatingly spoke again. "Do you think she'll go out with me?"

Severus laughed. "And I would know how? You know as well as I do that she has a mind of her own. The only way to find out, I'm afraid, is for you to ask her."

Lucius looked hesitant.

"So... how would one do that, if one were so inclined?"

"What do you mean, how does one do that? You pick a place where you might like to go, and you ask her if she would like to join you. What's the matter with you? Have you gone daft?"

"I've never... asked a woman out."

Severus looked confused.

"What?"

"I've only ever courted Narcissa, and that was arranged."

"What?"

"The other women about the Manor just show up."

"What?"

"Have you gone deaf?"

"What?" Severus steeled himself to explain the very basics of dating and sighed. "You think of something she might enjoy and ask her if she'd care to join you. I doubt you'll attend any Potions conference anytime soon, so perhaps you could take her to a nice restaurant. By the way, she is partial to the Texas Embassy."

"A Muggle restaurant?" Lucius looked aghast.

Severus snorted. "Yes, Lucius, a Muggle restaurant. In Central London. She grew up in the Muggle world, you know?" Then he added sardonically, "You might want to remember your stabilization charm if you do take her out. Klutz."

Lucius ignored the jab. "So, not only a Muggle restaurant, but one frequented by tourists..."

"She has a thing for fajitas."

"Fajitas? What the hell are you talking about now?"

Severus allowed another sigh to escape. "Never mind. You'll have to widen your horizons where food is concerned. The culinary world does go beyond English and French." He ignored Lucius's expression of incredulity. "But do take it one day at a time. Ask her out first. In person. She gets off work at five."

"Will you come with me?"

"Gods, no, man. I'm not going to hold your hand. She'll think we're doing something underhanded if we show up at the Ministry together."

Lucius looked lost. "I'm supposed to do this on my own? Severus... I don't know if I'll manage."

Severus gave him a stern look. "It's what every man does at some stage in life, Lucius. Well, every normal man," he amended.

"Are you saying I'm not normal?"

"Well... Let's say you are not a *typical* male. You've been buried in pureblood wizarding etiquette far too long." Severus's voice softened slightly. "The worst thing that can

happen is that she'll decline your invitation. Hermione is not the kind of person who'd laugh at you. But yes, you'll be on your own."

Severus set his drink down. "I'll leave you to come up with a suitable venue and method of asking then."

Lucius looked bereft at the thought of having to think of something on his own, but saw Severus to the door.

"I'll check in with you on Monday evening, old friend," Severus said, not unkindly.

"See you then."

A/N: Thanks go to blue_paris, whom we Imperiussed to beta for us.

A Peculiar Question

Chapter 2 of 4

Lions and Snakes and Cockroach Clusters... oh my!

A Peculiar Question

Finally, it was time to leave work after yet another long, dull day. When Hermione had first started her career at the Ministry, she'd thought working as a Potions researcher in Magical Law Enforcement would be more interesting, but the idea of sleuthing and discovering who poisoned whom had faded long ago.

All she seemed to be doing day in, day out was to process complaints from barmy old witches who were convinced Muggles were poisoning the water supply with caffeine-laden, fizzy drinks. Not that they didn't have a point. But all Hermione could offer was the advice to install purification charms all along the water pipes. Taking the Muggle authorities to task would not have gone down well with the Ministry, no matter how she itched to do just that.

She was surprised to see Lucius Malfoy loitering outside the Ministry entrance.

"Good evening, Mr. Malfoy," Hermione greeted him as she strode by, intent on getting to her flat as quickly as possible. She was surprised when Lucius grasped at her elbow to stop her from walking past.

"Miss Granger, I was wondering if I might have a word?"

She stopped, puzzled as to what he could want from her. "Certainly, Mr. Malfoy. What can I do for you?" Warm flat, good book. She wanted to flee, but her upbringing wouldn't allow it.

"Lucius."

"What?"

"Please, call me Lucius," he said with a smile that, had it not been on Malfoy's face, could have been considered shy. Why was Lucius Malfoy smiling shyly at her, she wondered, mystified. She suppressed a giggle as his cane slid out of his hand and he scurried about to pick it up, smoothing back some stray blond hairs as he stood up.

"I was wondering... uh..." he stammered, his face slightly flushed.

"Mr. Malfoy, I mean, Lucius, I am a Gryffindor. It may be better if you just say whatever it is you're trying to communicate and stop trying to be subtle. Subtlety is usually lost on us, anyway."

"Very well, then. I... was wondering... if you'd like to go to lunch with me on Saturday?"

"I beg your pardon?" Surely, she'd misheard.

He took a deep breath and tried again. "I was... uh... wondering if you would like to go to lunch with me on Saturday?"

"Lunch. With you. On Saturday. You mean, as in a date?"

"Er... yes." Lucius looked at everything but her.

"Did Severus put you up to this? If he did, I swear I will hex him into next week. First he makes some crack about a VD clinic, and now this."

"VD?" Lucius looked confused.

"Never mind. Did Severus put you up to this?" Hermione asked with the sternest tone she could muster, mentally pondering hexes for Severus.

"Uh... no. This is all my doing."

Hermione's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "And why should I go to lunch with you, Lucius?"

"Uh... because... I..."

"You didn't think this through very thoroughly, did you?"

"I was just hoping you'd say yes." He sounded defeated.

"Rather confident in your charm and persuasiveness, aren't you? Do you honestly think I'm interested in being another of your conquests, Lucius? I think not." She turned to flounce away haughtily.

"No!" Lucius grabbed her elbow in a desperate attempt to make her stay and found himself staring at Hermione's wand. His cane dropped again as he raised his hands in

defense.

"Why do you keep dropping your cane? Are you drunk?" Hermione couldn't detect any alcohol, but she had to ask nevertheless. This was not quite the Lucius Malfoy she knew, however little.

"No. Not drunk. Just... I'll tell you. Just agree to go to lunch with me. Please," Lucius pleaded.

She stared at him, trying to make up her mind whether to hex him and be done with it or succumb to the hopeless look on his face.

"I wasn't trying to be arrogant; it just comes out that way sometimes."

Oh, now he was whining. Hermione lowered her wand and bent down to pick up his cane.

"Lunch. Saturday. Noon. Meet me at the Texas Embassy. Don't. Be. Late." She shoved his cane into his chest and stalked off, exasperated.

It might have been more proper to Apparate to the gates of Hogwarts, but she had a Floo connection directly into Severus' chambers from her flat. They hadn't really seen the point of closing the connection since they still borrowed each other's books all the time.

Hermione stopped in front of her fireplace to gather her thoughts. Then she grabbed a handful of Floo powder and stepped into the fire. "Severus Snape's dungeons, Hogwarts!"

After a moment of whirling past several homes, she came to a standstill and looked into Severus's living room. "Severus?"

He was sitting in his favorite chair reading the copy of *2001: A Space Odyssey* she'd given him on Saturday and eating a bowl of cockroach clusters.

He didn't look up. "Thirty minutes. It took you longer than I expected. Did you stop for ice cream on your way over?"

"I'm coming through, prat," Hermione announced.

Severus walked to the fireplace and offered her a hand up as she tumbled into his home.

"Is that a wand in your pocket or are you just happy to... oh, for the love of all that is holy...." She gave Severus a critical look up and down.

He cast a bewildered glance at her. "What's this about?"

"I know you walk around with robes on all day, but even *you* have to notice that your trousers are at least one size too small." Hermione flicked her wand, and his pants adjusted themselves to a larger size.

He cocked his head to one side, as if thinking very hard about something.

"You know, that is more comfortable. Thank you." He sat back down in his chair and motioned for her to sit across from him.

"I can't keep doing your domestic charms for you, love." She kissed him on the cheek, grabbed a handful of cockroach clusters, and flopped into the chair across from him. "Your next girlfriend will think that's really crossing the line. If you want to become a bottomless pit, that's fine, but either learn some foolish wand waving or buy some bigger clothes."

"I did. But they're Muggle clothes. And they're in the laundry. Did you want something, or did you just stop by to tell me that I'm getting fat?"

"You *are* getting fat, Severus Snape, and you know exactly why I'm here, and it's not that."

He sat down across from her and waited. It didn't take long.

"Has he gone mental?"

"I assume you're speaking of Lucius?"

She threw a cockroach at him. "Severus..."

"I have no idea, Hermione. For some reason he seems to have suddenly discovered your charms."

"And you're *positive* you had nothing to do with this change of heart?"

"Hermione, I *swear* I didn't even know he had these thoughts until Saturday when he asked me if you were available."

"And I *swear* if I find out that you are behind this, I will tell Percy Weasley that you think he's the hottest thing to come out of a Weasley closet since Fred and George's self-heating parkas set themselves on fire."

"That's a frightening thought, but I am not concerned, as I had nothing to do with this potential fiasco. I will be willing to testify under *Veritaserum* in front of a full session of the Wizengamot, if necessary."

"Bold words." Hermione grinned at him.

"Out. I have to go to dinner and make sure the little miscreants in my House aren't trying to set fire to any Muggle-borns. And don't come back unless you're bearing ice cream or some other form of penance for suspecting that I had anything to do with Lucius Malfoy asking you out."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Fine. I shall not darken your doors again unless I am bearing your new love in life: food. Speaking of which, if all you meant when you said, 'We should go out and experience life and other people' was that you were going to sit in your chambers and stuff your face, I would have just stayed."

"And have you miss out on Mr. Malfoy's charming and suave company? How could I live with the guilt?"

"I could set you up with my cousin..."

"Out!"

Hermione dove back into the Floo to avoid the barrage of Cockroach Clusters being thrown at her and landed back at her own flat with a resounding thud.

Lunch with Lucius Malfoy on Saturday. Good heavens.

A/N: Grateful thanks go to blue_paris for betaing, even without the Imperio.

A Peculiar Saturday

Chapter 3 of 4

A trip to Diagon Alley, ice-cream, and an invitation.

A Peculiar Saturday

Severus glanced at the wall on the mantle again. He didn't really know why he should care that in thirty minutes, his two best friends would be having lunch together. Well, he did know why he cared. He loved Hermione, and Lucius didn't exactly have a history of being a decent human being. But while he felt a pang of jealousy and loneliness, he still stood by his decision to let her go. It wasn't that he thought she deserved *better* than him, it was that he thought she deserved anything or anyone she wanted, and he wanted to make sure she knew what that was.

She'd only ever been with him after the war, and he'd be damned if ten years from now she'd start resenting him because she'd never had a chance to experience life outside of his dungeons. When he'd mentioned it to her, however, she'd responded in kind. She'd said that if he was going to push her out of the nest, she was pushing him out as well. She pointed out that she'd been the first person he'd been in a relationship with outside of his obsession with Lily Potter, and she'd be damned if in ten years he was going to buy a red sports car and get a nineteen-year-old mistress because *he* hadn't experienced life. He didn't think she really believed he'd do that, but she had a valid point.

Glancing at his potions stores, he began to make notes on what he needed to pick up from the Apothecary in Diagon Alley. Besides, Fortescue's had re-opened under a new owner, a guy called Mike. Might as well go out and get something done while Lucius and Hermione were frolicking in Muggle London.

Lucius in Muggle London, he snickered to himself. His thoughts turned briefly to his two-year relationship with Hermione. It had been tumultuous, to say the least. They'd battered and badgered each other until he was almost human and Hermione had become a confident woman who didn't take any flak from anyone. It was a catharsis, of sorts, for both of them, and Lucius had probably bitten off more than he could chew. Laughing to himself, he took off to Diagon Alley and the new and improved Fortescue's.

"Fudge swirl or strawberry... fudge swirl or strawberry... chubby hub – what? Hey, Mike, since when did you start offering Muggle American ice cream flavors?"

"Just a couple of weeks ago. Do you want to try this one? It's got pretzels, fudge, and peanut butter."

"That sounds interesting, yes." Looking up just in time to see a flash of red, Severus suddenly found himself in a heap on the floor with a wiggling Weasley all over him. At least it was the female variety; he shuddered when he thought of Hermione's threat regarding Percy.

"ACK! Professor Snape! Sorry, sorry, sorry." She scrambled to get off of him, blushing furiously.

He clambered to his feet, and she began to dust him off; then she realized what she was doing and stopped.

"Professor Snape! Fancy running into you... er... I mean..." She looked him up and down and tried again. "You're looking... um... healthy."

Severus rolled his eyes.

"This can't get any worse, can it?" she asked, eyes shut in mortification.

"I'm not sure I want to find out if it can," he replied with a sigh.

"Can I buy you an ice cream to make up for my appalling behavior? Or, I know! Even better, you can come with me to Mum's party!"

"How on earth could that be considered 'better'?" he asked. His trademark sneer was almost there, out of habit, but was weak and ineffective, as evidenced by her response.

"Well, what *were* your plans for the afternoon?" she asked with a cheeky grin.

Thinking for a minute, Snape conceded.

"I suppose you have a point. But let me get a pint of this to bring; it's some new Muggle flavor—your father will think it's smashing. And I need to stop by the apothecary first and order some supplies, but I can have them sent straight to Hogwarts. It shouldn't take more than a few minutes. Will that be acceptable?"

A brief flicker of surprise crossed Ginny's face when she realized he was actually saying yes, but she recovered.

"As long as we can stop in at Flourish and Botts; they have the newest edition of *Advanced Theory of Magical Defense*"

She was, in turn, inordinately pleased at the look of shock that crossed his face.

"I'm not just a hot Quidditch star, you know."

"Apparently. Speaking of which, why are you even home? Don't the Harpies have an away game this weekend?" Severus paid for the ice cream, and they began walking towards Slug and Jiggers.

This time the look of shock on Ginny's face stayed.

"Professor Snape, I didn't know you followed professional Quidditch."

"All Potions and no play makes for a very bored Severus."

Ginny laughed at that.

"I imagine it does. And to answer your question, yes, the Harpies have an away game this weekend. But I've been suspended for two weeks for violating team rules. I reckoned I might as well come home and help the boys throw a surprise party for Mum's birthday. I was picking up ice cream when I, um... ran into you."

"What on earth did you violate?"

Ginny laughed and looped her arm in his. He stared at the linked arms, trying to fathom why she would do such a thing.

"Winslow Smythe's jaw. He's a sports journalist for the *Prophet*. He made a pass at me, and when I told him off for it, he said he could see why Harry hadn't asked me to marry him yet. I clocked him with my broom."

"I see."

"Do you? The manager of the team didn't and suspended me for two weeks. Apparently, it doesn't help our publicity if we go around hitting sleazy journalists around the head."

Ginny waited while Severus submitted his order to the apothecary clerk with the delivery instructions, and then they continued walking to the book shop.

As they entered the shop, Severus found himself rather confused about what had just happened. He'd been knocked over by a former student, she was being rather affectionate with him, and he'd just agreed to go with her to a party. At the Burrow, no less. *I've lost my mind*. Ogling unknown Muggles at the pub was one thing. Linked arm in arm with Ginny Weasley on the way to a party at the Burrow was quite another.

She paid for her book while he stood by the door, staring at nothing, trying to come up with a way to regain control of the situation. *Wait a minute. I'm Severus Snape. Hot Quidditch stars do not desire my company unless it's for nefarious purposes. Hmmm... I wonder what she would do if I returned the affection? Let's find out how far she's willing to take this prank.*

AN1: Special thanks to Silverdove and Mazzy for the ice cream flavor contributions. Sorry for the delay. RL has a habit of interfering. Next chapter is in the works, though, so shouldn't be long.

A Peculiar Meeting

Chapter 4 of 4

A pool table, a klutz, and a conversation. You only *thought* you knew Lucius Malfoy.

Blond and Awkward

A Peculiar Meeting

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CHAPTER FOUR

Hermione knew her impatience was unwarranted as she stood under the Texas flag outside the restaurant. It was only 11:57, but she wanted to get this over with and figure out what Lucius really wanted.

He finally arrived by Muggle taxi at 12:01. It was tempting to give him a hard time about being late, but she took pity on him, as he struggled with Muggle currency in his attempt to pay the driver.

"Did you get it worked out?" she asked, nodding at the driver.

Why is he blushing?

"Uh. Yes. I apologize for my tardiness. I had technical difficulties with, well, everything." Lucius looked decidedly uncomfortable.

Hermione glanced at his attire and realized that he was wearing an expensive Muggle suit and was sans cane. A series of thoughts washed over her in rapid succession.

At least there's nothing to drop.

He went to a lot of trouble for this.

He looks dashing.

The witch realized she was staring at him when he offered her his arm. She shook her head. "Sorry. I... I'm still trying to figure out what it is you want." She took his proffered arm, and they entered the restaurant.

Soon after they were seated in a booth at the back of the large room, a young waiter approached. "Hermione! How lovely to see you!" He paused momentarily, looking at Lucius, obviously confused, then gathered himself. "New company today, I see. Still want your usual?"

Hermione smiled at him. "Yes, please. I'll have guacamole with pico de gallo, and..." she paused briefly, "a Strawberry Margarita."

The waiter nodded and turned to Lucius. "And for you, sir?"

Lucius frowned slightly, still looking at the menu. "I will have a... Gold Cadillac." He looked at Hermione. "What do you recommend as a starter?"

Hermione grinned. "Everything is splendid; it depends what you like or don't like. Let's see... Do you like it spicy?"

Lucius raised his eyebrow. "Yes. Yes, indeed. I do."

"I'd go for the fried jalapeños, then."

Lucius placed his order with the waiter, who nodded and left the couple to their own devices. Hermione slipped her wand out and cast a spell so that the waiter would only think they were talking about the weather unless they were speaking directly to him. It was quite a neat little piece of wand-work she'd developed, if she did say so herself.

"How did you find this place?" Lucius asked. "It seems rather... touristy."

"Severus and I were shopping in London one day and saw it. We thought it was amusing that there was an American restaurant smack in the middle of the tourist part of Muggle London. And not just an American restaurant, either; it's specifically something called TexMex.

"We liked the food - it's spicy in a different way from Indian food. I'm sure they tone down the spice for us. It seems to be geared toward tourists, but you'll occasionally find a weary Texan traveler who stumbles in, desperate for a jalapeño and some salsa. I've spoken to a couple of them, and they said it's not as good as you'll find *in* Texas, but it will do in a pinch."

Lucius frowned. "You say you came here with Severus? Quite often, from the looks of confusion the waiter is giving you."

Hermione laughed. "It's one of Severus' favorite places, oddly enough. I think he likes it because he can get away with ordering four appetizers and a main dish and no one thinks badly of him. To be honest I just thought it would be funny to see you try to navigate yourself in a Muggle restaurant."

"I see."

The starters arrived and Hermione set to work showing Lucius how to eat Tex Mex. He fumbled with his knife and fork, he fumbled with putting the salsa on the chip, and he almost knocked his Gold Cadillac into his lap.

Exasperated, Hermione finally snapped, "Merlin's beard, man, what's wrong with you? Have you been cursed? Do you need me to research it and break it for you? I don't mind!"

If Hermione was bewildered by Lucius' lack of motor control, she was completely flummoxed by the sight of Lucius Malfoy, debonair ladies' man and pure blood snob, turning beet red. He began fidgeting with his fork, which slid out of his hands. Hermione took both of his hands and laid them flat on the table and held them there. He'd probably hurt himself otherwise.

"You promised you'd tell me why you keep dropping things. Talk."

Lucius cleared his throat and spoke to his plate.

"I am clumsy."

"No you're not. I've never seen you continuously drop things. You were devastating with your wand at the Ministry. Did this happen in Azkaban?"

Lucius involuntarily shuddered and shook his head.

"I have always been clumsy. When I was a child, my mother would cast a stabilization charm on me, a very complex one, so I wouldn't look like an oaf. In retrospect, I think she did me a disservice. I probably would have sorted it out eventually and learned balance. But instead, the charm took care of that for me. It requires a lot of power to cast and is a bit draining to hold. When I grew older, I learned to do it myself. I can cast it, and I can hold it, but when I'm nervous, I can't do the wand movements. In my previous life, that was never an issue...being nervous."

"Why on earth would you be nervous around me?"

"Let me put it this way: I was never even one-tenth this nervous when the Dark Lord confiscated my house and treated me like a wayward house-elf."

Hermione's eyes widened in realization and she suddenly let go of his hands. He folded them quickly into his lap.

While she had released his hands, she hadn't fled the table, screaming. He took that as a promising sign and rushed to finish the rest of his explanation. Hopefully she would appreciate his attempt at Gryffindor bluntness.

"I would watch you, with Severus. You two were always so animated. I wondered what it would be like to have a witch who actually seemed to want to be around me and listened to what I say. I know that sounds pathetic, especially from me. But you must realize that Narcissa and I had an arranged marriage, and while we were fond of each other, we were simply companions who had a son." He stopped suddenly when he realized Hermione's eyes had glazed over.

"I'm sorry. I'm making a hash of his."

"It's just... completely unexpected..." Hermione responded weakly, reaching for her drink.

"May I court you?"

She choked on her margarita. Roger, the waiter, pounded her on the back and glared at Lucius. When she'd regained her composure, she looked at Lucius for a moment and then told Roger, "We'll have the barbecue platter."

At Roger's raised eyebrow and glance at Lucius, she said, "It's going to be a mess no matter what we order."

While they waited for their meal to arrive, she looked at Lucius speculatively.

"What does this 'courting' business entail?"

"I have no idea."

"What do you mean, you have no idea. You're the one who brought it up. Isn't that what pureblood snobs do?"

"My marriage to Narcissa was arranged. There was really very little 'courting' involved. We went to tea parties at other people's houses and occasionally had formal balls. I don't know you very well at all but somehow I do not believe either of those things would appeal to you?"

Hermione looked appalled. The waiter arrived with the food, and they began eating. Hermione made a mental note to clean Lucius up after the meal. No one with any conscience would let anyone, even Lucius Malfoy, walk out of a restaurant with as much food on him as Lucius had on his expensive suit.

"I thought not. I thought perhaps we could go to a museum. Or even one of those Muggle things the story on the screen?"

"A movie?"

"Yes. I would like to take you to a movie." He looked pleased with himself.

"Lucius... please don't take offense.... But would you mind terribly if I asked Severus to brew up some Veritaserum and I asked you what your intentions are? I was tortured at your house, and your son was horrible to me for years."

"I thought you'd never ask." He rummaged around in his coat pocket and produced a vial. "Veritaserum."

"You do realize I don't trust you enough to even believe that it's what you say it is?"

"Ask Severus, he brewed it. He said you'd never believe that I was genuinely interested in you."

Hermione whipped out a cell phone, furrowing her brow in a vain attempt to understand everything that had just happened.

Thank goodness Severus answered. He'd balked when she'd given him the phone. But she'd badgered him and he'd given in in case he needed to contact her parents or something similar.

"Severus?"

"Mmm?" She could hear lots of people talking in the background.

"Where are you? Did you give Lucius a vial of Veritaserum?"

"I'm at the Burrow. You should come; they're throwing a surprise party for Molly. It was all last minute. Miss Weasley says she's sorry she didn't have a chance to owl you about it. Yes, I gave Lucius a vial of Veritaserum. It should have a green stripe on it."

"Ok, thanks." She ended the call and stared at the phone, and then at Lucius. "First you, then him," she muttered. "The world's gone mad."

"What do you mean?"

"He said he was at a party at the Burrow."

"What?"

"Exactly. Drink your Veritaserum."

"Oh. Right."

He dropped three drops on his tongue.

"Ask away."

"What is your name?"

"Lucius Abraxas Malfoy."

"Why are you here?"

"We had a date."

"What is your interest in me?"

"I wish to see if we're compatible for marriage."

"What?!"

Lucius looked confused by the question.

"I wish to see if we're compatible for marriage."

"I thought you just wanted to court me."

Again, Lucius looked confused.

"Sorry, Lucius. Ignore that. Did Severus Snape put you up to this?"

"No."

"Did anyone put you up to this?"

"No."

"Do you desire to court me for any other reason than marriage?"

"No."

"Why do you want to court me?"

"I find you interesting. I like you."

"Are you really clumsy?"

At this, Lucius blushed.

"Yes."

Unfortunately, Hermione realized she was done questioning him before the potion wore off and realized that ethically, she'd just have to remain silent until it did. The potion would wear off in about twenty minutes. Suddenly, she grinned.

"Do you want to crash Molly Weasley's surprise part at the Burrow?"

"Yes."

Hermione looked up, shocked.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you seem to want to go. I want you to be happy."

Hermione stared at him, incredulous. The world had indeed gone mad.