

# Hidden Treasures

by Dreamy\_Dragon

Hermione goes in search of a book. She finds a lot more.

## One

Chapter 1 of 4

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*Make thy books thy companions. Let thy cases and shelves be thy pleasure grounds and gardens.*

*(Judah Ibn-Tibbon)*

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The sentence didn't make any more sense than it had the three times she had read it before. With a sigh, Hermione scratched it out and pulled *Old and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charms* towards her. She turned to the chapter on intruder charms, looking at the same page she had consulted ten minutes ago. There was nothing new in it. Shaking her head, she closed the book and put it, together with her notes, into the desk drawer she reserved for current case files. She stood up and walked over to her office window. Peering into the dim afternoon light, she noticed that it was still raining. *What did you expect? It was raining this morning, it was raining half an hour ago, and it will probably still be raining tonight. Honestly, this is ridiculous.*

She returned to her desk, straightened out the quills, and sorted through her parchments. Most of them went into a neat little pile on one side of the desk; a few that were not meant for possibly prying eyes were shoved into one of the drawers. Just in case, she warded it, then she walked around her desk. Neat and professional from a visitor's point of view. With a little smile, she pointed her wand at the chair in front of her desk and lowered the seat a few inches. A glance at her watch informed her that it was another five minutes before her newest client would arrive. She dug through yet another drawer in her desk until she found her little compact mirror. A new coat of lipstick seemed to be in order. Of course, a few strands had escaped her carefully constructed bun; she tried to twist them back in with her fingers. As a result, more strands made a bid for freedom, causing her hair to resemble a bird's nest. 'Oh, crap.'

Finally, she used a spell to tame her hair into submission. Perfect. A neat orderly bun. She smiled at her mirror image for about a second before a strand chose to escape its confinement, quickly followed by a few comrades. 'That's a losing battle, dear,' her mirror quipped.

'Oh, shut up.' She was about to try again, but a soft knock on the door interrupted her. She hastily shoved the mirror back into the drawer, tugged at the collar of her robe, and drew a deep breath.

'Come in.'

Lucius Malfoy strode into her office. 'Thank you for seeing me at such short notice, Miss Granger.' He greeted her with a slight bow.

'Ginny said it was rather urgent.'

Actually, what Ginny had said had been more along the lines of would she please please please make an appointment with her father-in-law as soon as possible to stop him coming round at all hours to inform them about his troubles and the progress he was not making while he made himself comfortable in their home; otherwise, she wouldn't be able to stop herself from using some of her more creative hexes.

Lucius stood in front of her desk, casting a quick look around her office before his eyes came to rest on her.

'Please have a seat, Mr Malfoy. Can I get you anything? Tea? Coffee?' she asked.

'No, thank you,' he replied.

Hermione sat down behind her desk. Pulling a piece of parchment and a quill towards her, she asked, 'How may I help you?'

'I'd prefer our conversation to remain unrecorded,' Lucius said.

'Of course. I can assure you that Granger and Goldstein takes the utmost care to ensure discretion in all our transactions with our clients,' Hermione replied, putting the quill aside.

Lucius inclined his head in acknowledgement. 'So I've heard.' He paused for a few seconds. 'My request is of a somewhat delicate nature.'

Hermione let her eyes wander over his face and his impeccable robes. They seemed to be hiding a rather nice body, and he looked well overall, though there was a slight tic on the side of his neck that marred the picture of perfect composure he was presenting.

Lucius had obviously noticed her gaze. He graced her with a smile before he continued, 'I presume you're aware that a number of my possessions ended up in the Ministry's vaults after the troubles a few years ago...'

'You could also say that a substantial number of Dark objects were found in your house after the war and were subsequently confiscated by the Ministry,' Hermione answered. *Good strategy, Hermione. Antagonising a potential new client will surely get you the job.* She decided to ignore the annoying inner voice but added a charming smile of her own to temper her blunt words.

Lucius continued as if he hadn't heard her interruption. 'Most of them were recently restored to me.' He paused again.

Hermione simply nodded, waiting for him to go on.

'However, an item that is very dear to me is still missing. It appears that it disappeared while under the Ministry's care.'

'That is a severe accusation. If you remember, I was working at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement at the time. Didn't you sign a document for the restitution of all your possessions?'

The tic at the side of his neck became more pronounced. 'I did.'

'And now it suddenly occurred to you that something is missing?'

'Let's say there were convincing... arguments to sign the documents at the time.'

Hermione sighed. 'Mr Malfoy, unless you're prepared to provide me with more detailed information, I'm not sure we have anything to talk about.'

Lucius remained quiet for a few moments. Then he said very softly, 'It was suggested to me that I accept a certain sum in compensation and forget the item in question had ever existed if I wanted to keep new evidence against myself and Draco from turning up.'

'But there wasn't...oh.' So the rumours were true. Someone had seen fit to pilfer confiscated items from the Ministry's vaults. The rumours had died down quickly when the few pardoned Death Eaters had signed their inventory lists without a fuss.

'Exactly. Old family heirlooms have a value that cannot be measured in gold or Galleons. I will never be at rest until everything is safely restored to me.' Lucius carefully studied the head of his cane, his face the perfect picture of sorrowful concern.

Hermione sighed. 'Mr Malfoy, I'm still not sure how I can help you. While I disagree with the way the Ministry handled this whole business, there is little I can do about it. If you plan on making the whole affair public, you'll need more and different back-up than we can provide. If you want to try and bring the matter before the Wizengamot, you'll need a lawyer and a couple of bodyguards. Granger and Goldstein is neither as I'm sure you're aware.'

'I've no intention of making anything public.'

Hermione didn't fail to notice that his eyes could become rather captivating as they focussed on her.

'As I said before, I'm not sure how we can be of assistance.'

'Oh, I think you can, Miss Granger. In fact, you seem to be the perfect candidate. Since you worked at Magical Law Enforcement, you're already familiar with the affair. You know that utmost discretion will be required in locating my property, not to mention that your expertise in your field will come in very handy.' He almost purred.

Hermione reminded herself firmly that it wouldn't do to get distracted by his, albeit considerable, charm. 'If by expertise you mean to imply that the objects you're looking for are Dark in nature, I'm even less inclined to help you.'

'Tsk, Miss Granger. We both know that whether or not an object is "Dark" is mostly a matter of academic debate. So let's not dwell on trivialities. No, I was suggesting that as a charms consultant with a specialisation in curse-breaking, you'd have the necessary caution to handle complex magical objects. In addition, your unique background would enable you to move unobtrusively,' Lucius said.

Hermione caught on immediately. 'You mean that the... object might be found in a Muggle collection or a Muggle shop?'

'Yes, that might be the case, Miss Granger. I'm looking for someone who is able to move in both worlds without attracting undue notice and who has the necessary expertise to handle these objects. Naturally, I would reimburse all your travel expenses in addition to your usual fee. My daughter-in-law praised your considerable abilities, and she mentioned that you might be interested in, shall we say, a change in your daily routine. Of course, I understand if you'd be too busy to take on this kind of work. I'll find someone else, then.' His fingers hadn't stopped slowly twirling his cane while he was speaking.

*No, you won't. You're really desperate for me to go in search of whatever it is that you want back so urgently.* Hermione thought. 'It might help my decision, Mr Malfoy, if I actually knew which item we're talking about.'

In one swift move, Lucius pulled a folded sheet of parchment out of his robe. When he unfolded it, Hermione saw the drawing of a book.

'This has been in my family for centuries. If you look closely, you'll recognise the Malfoy crest on the cover. You will understand that I would like to see it returned to me.'

Hermione nodded while she quickly glanced at a book of fairy-tales she had inherited from her grandmother and now kept in her office as a sort of good-luck charm. The thought of its possible loss made her chest feel very tight for a second. She took a closer look at the picture. By the looks of it, the book was very old, bound in black leather. Arabesques adorned the cover; artfully woven into them so that it was not immediately obvious to the casual observer was the Malfoy crest and a number of ancient runes, not all of which looked familiar at first sight, but she was able to identify those standing for "protection", "family", and "heritage". Her curiosity was piqued.

'What is the book about?'

'It's the genealogy of the Malfoy family. It traces our roots back to the time my ancestors came over from France,' Lucius answered.

'Hm. Any idea what happened to it after it vanished from the Ministry?' Hermione asked.

'I was able to make a few discreet enquiries. My contacts could follow its trace as far as Paris, but then it seems to have disappeared completely.'

Hermione was tempted to ask him why he didn't go in search of his book himself, but then the thought of Lucius Malfoy trying to enter a Muggle bookshop unobtrusively had her very nearly snorting. Reminding herself that embarrassing a potential client was not conducive to business, she quickly got a grip on herself and sorted through the information he had given her. Things didn't really add up, but it sounded a lot more interesting than the projects she'd recently been working on.

'You've captured my interest, Mr Malfoy. I'll try to find your book. Here are my conditions: you will pay my usual fee plus all travel expenses. In return, you'll receive regular reports on the progress I'm making. If you want them coded, I'll do so for an additional fee. Please understand that our contract does not guarantee the success of my search.'

Malfoy nodded briefly. Hermione pointed her wand at one of the filing cabinets, and a standard form sailed onto her desk. Two more waves added the specifics of the contract.

He took the parchment, read it through, and signed it with a flourish after he had added the necessary details. 'Thank you, Miss Granger. I'm sure the search for my family heirloom is in good hands.'

'Thank you, Mr Malfoy.'

He gave her a short bow and was turning to leave when Hermione said, 'Oh, one more thing, Mr Malfoy. Why now?'

'My son's marriage has reminded me how vital it is to preserve our heritage for the following generations.' With another short bow he was gone.

Hermione sat staring at the contract after the door had closed behind him. He had nearly doubled the sum of her fee and expenses. As far as she knew, Lucius Malfoy wasn't prone to sentimentality. So, what was it that he hadn't told her?

A quick glance at her watch confirmed that she had enough time for a chat with some of her former colleagues before meeting Ginny for drinks.

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Hermione gave Ginny a quick hug. 'What can I get you?'

'A half of pear cider, please.'

Hermione decided on a half of ale and some crisps for herself. After she'd made her way back to the table with their drinks, the two friends settled on the comfortable bench and took a large sip.

'Ron says, "hi."'

'Thanks. Still the enthusiastic father, is he?' Hermione asked.

Ginny grinned. 'The girls have him securely wrapped around their little fingers. It's driving Pansy absolutely spare.'

'The little angels.' Realising how hungry she was, Hermione tore open the bag of crisps. She munched a handful before she said, 'Lucius Malfoy came to see me this afternoon.'

'Good, that will hopefully keep him off our backs for a while.' Ginny took another large swig of her drink.

'That bad?' Hermione asked.

'Yes. No. I mean, he's nice and everything. It's just... I mean, we've only been married for three months, and he never owls or anything. He just turns up...and that can be a bit embarrassing.'

Hermione started to giggle.

'It's not funny,' Ginny said before she, too, started to giggle.

After they had calmed down, Hermione said, 'Married life suits you.'

'Draco suits me.' Ginny's face took on a dreamy expression.

Before she could elaborate any further on the doubtless numerous qualities of her husband, Hermione quickly asked, 'Do you know what it's all about?'

'What is what about? Oh, the whole family heirloom thing? No, not really.' Ginny shrugged.

'Still, it's weird. I sneaked into the files. Actually, a couple of confiscated items went missing, but nobody bothered to record what and whose,' Hermione said.

'How did you get into the Ministry files?' Ginny asked.

Hermione grinned. 'I'm well connected. Besides, the wards still recognise me.'

'Remind me not to get on the wrong side of you.' There was a clear note of admiration in Ginny's voice. 'Anything else you've found?'

'Not much. Apart from the Malfoys, hardly anyone managed to get their things back other than the Parkinsons and the Notts. Lucius Malfoy signed the inventory list the same day his pardon was made official. Loads of people have access to the vaults, and the records of who goes in when are sloppy at best. I may need to get in touch with Mundungus, see if he's heard anything.' Hermione scrunched up her nose. 'Any idea why this is so important?'

'I suppose Lucius wants his stuff back. Y'know, after his name has been cleared, and all?' Ginny eyed her empty glass. 'Another one of those?'

Hermione nodded. When Ginny returned with their new drinks, she said, 'He's rather dishy.'

Hermione had been contemplating another bag of crisps. 'Who is?'

'Lucius.'

'He's got nice hair.' Hermione twirled one of her own unruly curls around her finger.

'So, you've noticed. I'm glad you occasionally look at a man who's not in a book from your collection.'

'Don't start that again. They're erotica. Art. Literature,' Hermione said.

'Of course, it's all an intellectual pursuit. What's in those books of yours has no titillating value, whatsoever,' Ginny observed.

'I didn't exactly say that.' Hermione took a large gulp from her glass.

'It's been what? Two years since you went out with anyone, since whasisname?' Ginny continued.

'Ginny! His name was Terry. Are you trying to pair me off? With Lucius Malfoy of all people? You seem to have forgotten a few things about him.' Such as his past, for example.

Ginny shrugged. 'He's changed a lot from what I can tell. He even makes an effort to get along with mum and dad. So, who knows? Besides, I always thought you'd be better off with someone older. Someone who isn't scared of you.'

Silence.

'Didn't you have a bit of a crush on Snape at one point?'

Hermione took another sip of her drink. 'A bit,' she admitted.

'See.' Ginny grinned.

Hermione's throat suddenly felt tight as it so often did when she thought of Severus Snape. 'But he was already dead by then. I think it was more a bit of hero-worship or something like that. Knowing all he did for us and all that happened to him...'

Ginny briefly squeezed her shoulder. 'I know. It's a shame. He should have lived, been happy, and all that.'

Hermione simply nodded, her vocal cords unwilling to cooperate.

'Still, it's weird that they never found his body,' Ginny said.

Hermione swallowed, her heart beating a little faster. 'I know it's silly because I saw him die. But sometimes I like to think that he didn't. Remember his first year speech? "To put a stopper in death" and all that? I mean, he was a Potions master and a really great wizard. How could he die from a snakebite? So sometimes I like to think, maybe he got away. Maybe he's living somewhere, happy...' She swallowed again.

Ginny quickly put an arm around her friend. 'Maybe he is.'

Both were silent for a moment before they decided it was time for a fresh drink.

'So, are you going to do it?' Ginny wanted to know.

'Do what?' What was Ginny on about? Things were starting to get a bit blurry.

'Work for Lucius Malfoy. Find the family... the thingy, and raid all bookshbookshopsh everywhere.'

Hermione tried to focus. 'It's your family, too, now. But yes, I'm going to do it. It's a good opportunity to travel among other things, though I think there's something shady about the whole affair. There's more to it.'

Ginny shrugged. 'Maybe. Or maybe Lucius's just being Lucius.'

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Hermione looked over the chaos on her desk. Maps, reference books, and several sheets of parchment containing notes and lists were spread all over it. So far, she had worked her way through about half of them. She had neatly indexed every bookshop she had been to, every book dealer or book lover she had spoken to, and what information they'd been able to provide. All in different colours, of course. All to no avail. Other than confirming Malfoy's information, there was hardly a trace of his damn genealogy book to be found anywhere. She had started to wonder whether he had sent her on a wild goose chase. Maybe the book had simply vanished into a private collection or been destroyed. When she had tried to put these possibilities gently across to Lucius Malfoy, the blond had all of a sudden become very twitchy. Further enquiry yielded that he'd know if the book had been destroyed. As for some collector happily coveting a genealogy of the Malfoy family...Lucius had flat out denied that possibility, offering no further explanation and doubling her fee yet again.

What made him so desperate to have this particular book back? His obsession with his family and his lineage wasn't exactly a secret, but according to Ginny, there was another family genealogy in the Malfoy library...in eight volumes no less...so why this one? Or was it simply that Lucius Malfoy didn't take kindly to anything vanishing that belonged to him? Hermione gave up on her musings and went to make a fresh cup of tea before she consulted her list of French second-hand bookshops once more. Most of them had answered her enquiries readily enough. Still, she wondered if it wouldn't be better to go to France and have a look for herself.

On her way back to her desk, her gaze fell onto the two small volumes that were her latest acquisitions. At least her collection of written erotica had profited substantially from her forays and Lucius Malfoy's generous fees.

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The next morning, she woke up so early that it was still dark outside. Over a steaming mug of tea, Hermione consulted her lists again. Surely it would be best to start in Paris and work her way systematically through the larger cities? She put her mug down and stared out of the window into the dim morning light. It was late April, and there was no sign of spring. Instead, it was still cold, foggy, and the day promised yet more rain. Hermione turned on the heating before she pulled her cardigan tighter around her. Elsewhere, there would be a clear sky, sunshine, and warmth.

On a whim, she decided to go to Marseille, convincing herself that that was as good a place as any other to continue with her search; besides the only clues she had found seemed to point in that direction. She had agreed with Lucius that it was best to keep a low profile, which ruled out a Portkey. She shuddered at the thought of taking a broom for such a long ride. Hermione pondered Apparating but couldn't decide on a good destination. Besides, Apparition could also attract unwanted attention. Not for the first time, she wondered if Lucius was getting slightly paranoid or just indulging in a little bit of secrecy. In the end, she decided on Muggle transportation.

She dug through her bag to find her mobile. It had taken her months to find a way to keep magic from interfering with the reception, but she had wanted a way to keep in touch with her parents. After their little stint in Australia, they preferred communicating with their daughter through non-magical means. She rung rail services. Yes, she could book a seat on the Eurostar for the next day, and yes, she wouldn't have to wait too long for a connection to Marseille.

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Staring out into the grey, wet morning, she watched as the train pulled out of St Pancras and made its way through the city. She spent most of the journey going through her lists and notes once again.

When she arrived in Paris, it was still raining; to her dismay, Hermione noticed that her French had become rather rusty, so she would have to rely on Translation Charms. All in all, she was glad to reach the Gare de Lyon and board the TGV; luckily, she found a window seat. Once they had left the suburbs behind, the noise of the rain outside and the steady motion of the train made her increasingly drowsy.

*There were books everywhere. The bookcases that lined the walls were overflowing with them; further volumes were stacked on every inch of the table and the floor. Hermione reached down to one of the stacks to pick up the topmost book. When she extended her hand towards it, the book rose into the air and soared over to the shelves, followed by the others that had been stacked beneath it. The same number of books obligingly cleared a space in the book cases, floating up into the air and coming to rest neatly stacked on the floor. Hermione tried to take a small, red book from the middle shelf next. The result was the same: it rose into the air followed by a number of its fellow volumes. They were replaced by exactly the same number before they re-arranged themselves into a neat pile on a bit of free space. This happened each time Hermione tried to pick up a book until she spotted a black one on the topmost shelf. She had to clear a small footstool so that she could climb up to reach it. Surrounded by swirling books, she extended her hand towards the thick volume. It floated down, just out of her reach and then hung in mid-air so that she could get a good look at the cover. Hermione gasped; it looked exactly like the book Lucius Malfoy wanted so urgently. In her haste to make a grab for it, she nearly tripped over her feet. When she had found her balance again, she saw the book hovering a bit further away, keeping just out of her reach, towards a door that had appeared out of nowhere. She followed the book into a long, dimly-lit corridor. At the end of it, a swish of black robes disappeared round a corner. The book was gently gliding away in the same direction with Hermione following it through the corridor, and another one, brighter and warmer than the first, and then another until they stopped in front of a large four-poster bed. A thin man, clad in nothing but heavy black robes, was sitting on it, his head bent so that his black hair was obscuring his face. The book drifted down onto the pillow, flicked open and lay completely still. The man raised his head. 'About time, Miss Granger,' Severus Snape said.*

*Hermione looked into his black eyes. 'I'm sorry it took me so long.'*

*Severus rose from the bed; she took a step towards him. His body was warm when he pulled her to him, and his lips...*

Hermione's eyes snapped open; the comfortable motion had suddenly stopped. There seemed to be hundreds of little needles in her right arm; pain shot through her neck as she tried to move her head. Where was she? Oh, right. The train. She peered into the bright sunlight as the train started moving again and rapidly accelerated; the view from the viaduct they were now crossing at high speed made everything flying by appear oddly small, almost surreal. She pressed her forehead against the cool glass. Suddenly, her head jerked upward. Snape had been in her dream. Alive. And she had very nearly kissed him. A little sigh escaped her. If only she had slept a little longer...

By the time she got off the train in Marseille, Hermione felt much calmer again. After all, Snape was dead, and it had only been a dream...though one that held a lot of promise before it was so untimely interrupted. What mattered was to try and find Malfoy's book. She stretched in the sunshine, inhaling the warm, smooth air with its variety of smells before she descended the numerous steps from the station. After a bit of reflection, she decided to secure accommodation first, guessing that the search through the city's second-hand bookshops would take her at least another day.

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Hermione yawned and rubbed her burning eyes. She took another sip from her cup before she crossed the three bookshops in ~~the~~ *le Panier*, the city's oldest quarter, off her list. The wizarding one didn't exist anymore, and of the two others, one specialised in the city's history, and the second one didn't have what she was looking for. Hermione yawned again and looked at her list. The city centre looked promising. She cast a longing glance at her now empty coffee cup and the few crumbs that remained from her baguette. 'Might as well get on with it,' she muttered and left the comfortable shade of the café.

"Accents Toniques" presented a more promising façade than the other shops. They displayed a number of well-kept books on architecture behind clean windows; the sign that announced the shop's name looked like it had recently received a fresh coat of paint. Upon entering the shop, Hermione drew a deep breath. There were books everywhere: beautifully displayed on shelves, artfully arranged on tables...it was like stepping into a book lover's version of paradise.

'Can I help you?' The old man smiled at Hermione, his green eyes twinkling behind thick glasses.

Experience had taught Hermione to be extremely wary of anyone who twinkled, but the elderly shop assistant seemed to be genuinely friendly.

'I'm looking for books on family history and genealogy,' Hermione replied.

'We've got a number of those. Right over there.' He pointed to a number of shelves in the corner.

'Thank you.'

Hermione went over to the three shelves and started to look for a book that resembled the Malfoy genealogy. It would have been much easier to use magic, but apart from the old man, there was a middle-aged couple next to her looking through the books on ancient houses, and she didn't want to attract undue attention. She started scanning the uppermost ledge and worked her way down, noticing a thick volume bound in black leather that looked promising. Her heart started to beat a little faster as she pulled it out. With a sinking feeling, she realised that it was a Muggle history of a family that apparently had come to Provence a few hundred years ago. She put the book back. Nothing else even remotely resembled what she was looking for. Hermione cast a quick glance around her to verify that the other customers had left the shop. The old Muggle had disappeared to wherever he spent the time waiting for customers. She quickly pulled out her wand and ran a scan. No magical trace; all Muggle books on the shelf were indeed Muggle.

Hermione yawned again and tried to work the crick out of her neck before she made her way back to the front of the shop. The old man appeared from behind a shelf, carrying a stack of books.

'No luck?'

Hermione shook her head. 'No, but would you have an erotica section?'

'Back through there.' He winked at her, pointing to a doorway at the back of the shop.

'Thank you.' With a little tingle of anticipation, Hermione walked through the door into the other room.

Windowless and smaller than the room at the front, it was only dimly lit. One bookcase half obscured the doorway, making it impossible to see all of the room, but its walls appeared to be lined with yet more bookshelves. Hermione smiled; this looked very promising indeed. She started to make her way around the shelf into the room and then stopped dead in her tracks. A tall, slim figure clad in black was standing before one of the shelves, perusing a large book held in long, slender fingers. Most of his profile was hidden by strands of long, black hair, leaving only a very prominent nose visible. He looked up at her entrance, and Hermione found herself staring into a pair of black eyes. Her legs suddenly felt wobbly while her mouth went dry.

'You're alive,' she gasped.

# Two

## Chapter 2 of 4

Hermione goes in search of a book. She finds a lot more.

He just looked at her, neither confirming nor denying that he was who she thought he was. Suddenly, Hermione felt the slightest shift in the air around her. Without thinking, she cast a wandless Protego. The light that ricocheted off her shield and into one of the bookshelves, causing three books to come tumbling down with a crash, proved that her instinct had been right. She only hoped that whoever was in the front room was either deaf or didn't think it necessary to investigate.

She heard a muttered "damn", but he didn't make a second attempt. Yet, she kept her shield up. Her legs still felt like jelly, but she couldn't stop staring at the man everybody thought to be dead.

At least she'd managed to get her vocal cords back under control. 'Do you plan on trying to Oblivate me again, or can we have a conversation?'

'Why would I want to have a conversation with you?' His voice was cold.

'You... you're alive.' Her hand was shaking so badly that it became impossible to keep up the spell.

'Obviously.'

'How... I mean... why...'

'You've got exactly two minutes to explain how you found me, and if you make any attempt to alert anyone, I will Stun and Oblivate you.'

Definitely Snape. And he still knew how to be intimidating. But he was alive. Her heart continued to beat very fast while she leaned back against the nearest bookshelf. It wobbled slightly. Not her most pressing problem.

She stared at him, trying to think quickly of an explanation that wouldn't end up with her being Oblivated. The queasy feeling in her stomach wasn't helping matters at all. Stars began to dance before her eyes.

'One minute and a half.'

'I didn't.'

Snape just looked at her.

'One minute.'

This was not going well. Hermione drew a deep breath. 'I didn't come looking for you. As far as I knew, you'd been dead for nearly a decade. I saw you die. How can you be alive? I mean, I'm glad you are, but I didn't know... Oh, Merlin. You're alive.'

Finally processing that the man she had mourned was indeed standing in front of her, living and breathing, caused a warm tingly feeling to spread through her. It didn't last long.

'You're glad I'm alive?' Snape looked at her oddly for a second before he continued. 'Be that as it may. I won't give you a chance to go away and blab to anyone about it.'

'I understand.'

Snape snorted.

'Right, maybe I don't. But will you at least talk to me? Just for a bit? If you want to remain dead to the wizarding world, I respect that. But there're so many things I'd like to know. Please?' She hardly dared to breathe.

Snape's face had taken on an expression she couldn't discern. 'That doesn't mean I won't Oblivate you.'

'Of course not. A drink? I saw a brasserie just down the road.' Hermione tried to keep her voice steady.

'One drink.' Snape took the book he had been looking at when she came in and started to walk towards the front room.

'Dinner?'

'Don't push your luck, Miss Granger.'

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The small brasserie was nearly empty, so they sat at a table by the window. Hermione noticed that Snape chose the seat overlooking the entrance, which left her with a good look of the menu that someone had scrawled on a blackboard. After they had ordered a glass of *vin de pays*, red for Snape, white for herself, she perused the list of dishes.

'God, I'm hungry. The *ratatouille* sounds positively delicious, don't you think?'

Snape narrowed his eyes at her but didn't seem to think her remark worthy of a response. Still, when Hermione ordered *cocca* and the *ratatouille*, he chose the *pissaladière* for himself. Hermione quickly quelled the little grin that wanted to spread over her face.

They ate in silence; neither seemed to mind. The food was excellent, though Hermione hardly noticed what she was eating because she kept sneaking glances at the man opposite her. He hadn't changed all that much but looked significantly less gaunt than in her last year at Hogwarts. His hair was slightly longer with a few silver threads among the black, and the light tan he had acquired went well with his dark eyes and his prominent features. Two thin white scars ran upwards from his shirt collar, the only visible remains of Nagini's attack. He still dressed in black, but the Muggle outfit he wore made him seem less daunting than his ever-billowing robes. Or maybe he didn't need to scare anyone anymore; in any case, it suited him. She wondered if he was tanned everywhere and what his skin would feel like under her fingers. The room suddenly seemed to have grown a lot warmer. To her surprise, she found Snape's eyes resting on her as well when she looked up. She quickly directed her attention back to breaking another piece of the crusty white bread.

At last, their plates were cleared. Upon a little sign from Hermione, the waiter brought them fresh glasses of wine. Snape raised an eyebrow but didn't mention the fact that the one drink had somehow turned into dinner and two glasses of wine so far. He leaned back in his chair and fixed his look once more on Hermione. 'Why don't you start

asking all the questions that are doubtless plaguing you, Miss Granger, so we can get this over with?"

Hermione took a sip from her glass, trying to decide where to start. There was so much she wanted to know, and perhaps this was her only chance to ever talk to him. What if he vanished again after tonight? Before her throat could start to feel tight again, she quickly asked, "How did you do it? I thought I saw... you know."

"During the last year of the war, Voldemort had begun to use the snake as a weapon, and I didn't discount the possibility that he might use it against me...in the end. So I began to take anti-venin on a regular basis."

"But those wounds..." Hermione's eyes trailed to the thin scars on his neck.

"...would have been lethal, if I hadn't been found in time and received treatment."

Hermione didn't know what to say. This time, the silence that stretched between them wasn't comfortable. Finally, she whispered, "I went back to the Shrieking Shack after the battle, but you were gone. Harry had told us all about what you did and why. Kingsley had Aurors looking for your body for weeks. To... to give you a proper burial." She quickly wiped away the tears that were threatening to leak down her cheeks.

"How touching."

"I'm sorry." The words coming out of her mouth sounded so ridiculous. What did she mean to apologise for? Leaving him for dead without ever checking his pulse? Doubting and hating him? Or his miserable life? More tears threatened to run down her cheeks.

"Don't be." Despite his harsh words, his voice was surprisingly gentle.

"But I am. Really. For years I've wished that I could talk to you once again, just once. There were so many things I wanted to tell you, and... and now... now I'm messing it all up." She sniffled, trying to wipe away the wetness with the result that she smeared it all over her face. She blindly fumbled for one of the chequered napkins until her fingers found a soft piece of cloth. Hermione dabbed at her eyes until they were itchy, but at least they were dry, now. She didn't dare to look up at Snape again. Feeling like a complete idiot, she crumpled the napkin in her hands only to realise that it should have been bigger and coarser. Upon closer inspection, it turned out to be a white hanky. Oh. Now she did raise her head to find Snape looking at her, his expression unreadable. He pushed a glass of water towards her. "Drink."

The cool liquid running down her throat felt wonderful; she gulped down almost the whole glass.

"Thank you." Hermione was about to give him back his hanky, but the sight of the crumpled grey ball that had been a pristine white piece of cloth a few minutes before had her quickly withdrawing her hand.

A corner of Snape's mouth started to twitch ever so slightly. "Why don't you just keep it."

"Erm, yes. Thanks."

"What have you been doing? Have you been here all this time?"

Snape shook his head. "No. I'd always wanted to travel a bit. I came here about a year ago."

"Marseille seems to be a nice city."

"It's as good a place as any. Now, Miss Granger, I believe it is my turn. What brings you here?"

"A job."

"What kind of job?"

Hermione found it hard to concentrate any longer. How much did she want to tell him? Her feet and her back hurt; a headache began to form behind her temples, and the room was too warm. A bath would be nice...and a bed, but if she left now, she would never see Snape again. He would just disappear out of her life again. Suddenly, that seemed the worst thing that could possibly happen. But maybe...

"I'll tell you tomorrow."

A dark eyebrow went up. "We are not meeting tomorrow."

"But we could, couldn't we? Just for coffee?" Hermione's heart had started to beat a little faster again. "You could always Oblivate me afterwards if you wanted," she added quickly.

Snape regarded her with a quizzical expression on his face. Her heartbeat seemed to accelerate further with the seconds ticking by.

"Ten a.m. Les Danaïdes."

After they had paid, they stood in front of the brasserie. Snape nodded. "Goodnight, Miss Granger."

"Goodnight. See you tomorrow." On impulse, Hermione placed a swift peck on his cheek and then walked away quickly before he had time to react.

One a.m. found her standing at the open window of her hotel room, looking out into the dark, surprisingly warm, Mediterranean night and the city below. The map, on which she had looked up the café, rustled in the soft wind. She realised that Snape hadn't told her all that much. Who had saved him? What was he doing in Marseille? Was he disguised as a Muggle? How did he earn his living? Would he even show up tomorrow? What if he didn't? The latter question had her pacing around her room until the wee hours.

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When Hermione arrived at the café at a quarter to ten, Snape was already there. Warmth spread through her at seeing him alive and well, reading a Muggle newspaper. She joined him at the table and ordered a *café au lait*.

"You came," she said.

Snape folded his newspaper. "I believe we had an appointment."

"I would have searched for you."

"You wouldn't have found me."

"Oh, really? I'm good at finding hidden things."

"Not good enough."

"I found you without even looking for you. What did you think would happen if *bid* look for you?"

'You wouldn't stand a chance.'

'Not over-confident, are we?'

'Merely capable.'

'Right.' Hermione grinned. To her surprise, she saw that Snape's mouth had curled upward, too. She had never seen him really smile before; it took years off him. He looked rather nice, actually. Not conventionally handsome, but his dark hair and eyes, combined with his cheekbones and nose, made for a very attractive combination. A little tingle in her belly agreed with her assessment.

'So, Miss Granger, what brings you to Marseille?'

'I'm looking for a book.'

'Indeed.'

The eyebrow was wandering upward again. Hermione found she was becoming rather fond of it. 'I...hang on. What were you doing in that bookshop?' she asked.

'I, too, was looking for a book. Which is what one generally does in a bookshop, I believe.'

'You were in the Erotica section.'

'As were you,' Snape pointed out. 'Or did you stumble into it by coincidence?'

'No. I collect erotic books. I wanted to see if there was anything interesting.' Hermione raised her chin defiantly, just in case he had something to say about her hobby. At least, that was what she preferred to call it. Ginny would have called it an obsession.

As it turned out, he didn't. He looked rather intrigued. 'Not a very common interest; one I happen to share, though. How did you discover a taste for the more delectable areas of reading?'

'In the beginning, it was a bit silly. I thought I could learn something from these books.' Hermione paused.

Snape's face remained neutral. 'Did you?'

'No. Other than that it wasn't necessarily *my* technique that was lacking. Instead, I became fascinated by the different ways Erotica could be represented in writing and in art. I started to compare wizarding and Muggle books from various periods and how they differed in their approaches. The more I found out, the more I wanted to know, and now I look for books on the subject whenever I have the chance.'

When Snape nodded but didn't say anything, she asked, 'Where does your interest derive from?'

'I was bored. I spent nearly a year recovering from the bloody snakebite and couldn't do much else other than reading. So I would read whichever books I could get my hands on, a number of which were of an erotic nature. I developed an interest in the subject, found more books while I was travelling, and now regularly check a couple of antiquarian bookshops for their latest acquisitions. Which is what I was doing yesterday, to answer your earlier question.'

He seemed to be speaking to a point somewhere below her chin, which was usually the point at which she told a bloke where to stuff it. Snape's look didn't feel unpleasant, though. When he realised that she had caught him, he busied himself quickly with his coffee cup.

'Which reminds me that you haven't answered mine. So, what are you doing in Marseille? Other than looking for books.'

'Actually, I am looking for a book. It's my job. I can't tell you too much about it, obviously, client confidentiality, but I'd be grateful for any information about who else might deal in used books. I've already been through all the antiquarian bookshops.'

'Hm, I presume we're talking about a wizarding book? English?' Snape asked.

'Yes, a family genealogy. It could also be with a collector,' Hermione replied.

'Hm,' Snape said again. 'Are you sure it's here? Did it come here legally?'

'It didn't leave Britain legally to begin with. That's why my client wants it back.'

'Hm,' Snape said for the third time. 'I might know someone who might know something, but I'd need a more detailed description of the book.'

Hermione hesitated. Could she trust him? She knew he was trustworthy on a general level, but what about the specifics? She had no idea what his relation to the Malfoy family was. Did he despise them, hate them even? Or had they been friends? But then again, the world considered him dead; it was unlikely he would risk his cover, wasn't it? Still, better keep Malfoy's name out of it. She took the drawing of the book out of her bag and handed it to Snape.

He looked at it for a long time, his face guarded, then he asked. 'Who is your client?'

Hermione remained silent.

'Let me phrase this differently. Are you working for Lucius Malfoy?'

'Would it influence your decision to help me if I did?'

'Maybe.'

'In a good way?'

Snape didn't say anything. It seemed she wouldn't get anywhere without telling him. Hermione waited a few seconds longer, then she admitted, 'All right, Lucius Malfoy employed me to find his book.'

Dark eyes fixed on her.

'Stop it. I know what you're trying to do. I'm not lying to you. As strange as it may sound, I'm indeed working for Malfoy.'

Snape relaxed visibly. No hatred for the Malfoy family, then.

'How did the book get lost?'

'It was among the things the Ministry confiscated after the war. It disappeared while under the Ministry's care.'

'The Ministry botched it up, and now they're hoping that you'll fix it. Why doesn't that surprise me,' Snape said.



'The Ministry has nothing to do with it.'

Now Snape did look surprised.

'I stopped working for the Ministry two years ago. I wasn't too happy with the way they handled certain things. I'm working as an independent Charms consultant now,' Hermione explained.

'Still, it strikes me as odd that you of all people would work for Lucius.'

'It's a favour for Ginny, really. She's married to Draco.'

'I know,' Snape said.

Now it was Hermione's turn to look surprised.

'The *Daily Prophet* is sold in many places all over the world,' Snape pointed out.

'I know. I just didn't expect...'

'That I would follow what's happening in Britain? Just because I've no desire to live there anymore doesn't mean I'm not interested in knowing what's going on. It was hard to miss that particular story.'

'It was horrible for Ginny. The *Prophet* had a field day. And nobody cared to find out the facts.' Hermione shuddered to remember the headlines in the gossip section.

Snape's upper lip curled. 'I'm not particularly interested in the doubtless fascinating particulars, either. I'm sure it was terrible for your friend. So, Lucius has asked you to find his book?'

'Yes. Will you help me?' Hermione asked.

'I remember that book. It was one of Lucius's favourites. Most of the time, he kept it close at hand.'

Hermione watched as Snape's face took on a peculiar expression. 'I know someone who might be able to help us if the book is in Marseille. However, you will not mention my connection to Lucius,' he said.

'Of course.'

'I've some other things I need to take care of. Meet me back here at half four.' Snape rose and left, leaving Hermione to stare after him. Her gaze was arrested by his black jeans that were clinging snugly to his hips. Who would have thought that those voluminous teaching robes had hidden such a nice arse?

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Hermione spent the next few hours wandering aimlessly through La Plaine. She looked at some monuments and went browsing through a number of shops without really seeing anything. By four o'clock, she was back at the café. Snape turned up at exactly half past.

Without preamble, he said, 'I've made some enquiries. If the book is here, we'll find it. One of my contacts can meet us here tomorrow morning. We'll know more then.'

Hermione smiled at him. 'Thank you.'

'You're welcome.'

Silence stretched between them. Hermione looked at Snape. Would he leave immediately again? It would be nice to spend some time with him.

'Marseille is a beautiful city. At least in some parts. Have you had the chance to see anything yet?' Snape asked.

Hermione shook her head. 'Not much. I saw a bit of the area around here, but mostly I was busy searching for the book.'

'If you like, I could show you the *vieux port*,' Snape offered.

Hermione beamed at him. 'That would be very nice.'

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Hermione squinted at the ceiling; it was made of the same rough stone as the walls and the chancel above.

'Do you think the whole monastery looked like this?'

Snape nodded. 'It did. It was all built from the same material.'

Hermione shivered and sidled closer to him. 'It's very impressive, but imagine having to live in such a thing all year round.'

'Especially without warming charms.'

'Mmmh, good thing there's body heat.' Another inch closer.

'Not if you're a monk.' Snape didn't move away.

After they had looked at the rest of the relics in the crypt, they went back upstairs.

Outside, Hermione took a last look at the impressive front of the Abbey of Saint Victor before she briefly closed her eyes and tilted her head upward to let the sun caress her face. It felt nice with the warm air smelling faintly of the sea. A mixture of sounds drifted into her ear: the noises of the city, the boats bobbing gently up and down at the quay, and the voices of the people around them. A sense of well-being spread through her that increased when she opened her eyes and looked at the man next to her.

'Shall we take a stroll along the quay?' she suggested.

Snape didn't have any objection, so they walked along the rows of sailing boats and yachts interspersed with the occasional colourful fishing boat.

'Which one do you fancy?' Hermione asked.

'Sorry?' Snape looked at her oddly.

'The boats. It's a game I used to play with my parents when we were on holiday. My father loves boats, so we would often go and look at them. He would ask me to pick one for a trip or a cruise,' Hermione explained.

'Right. So are we talking about a little tour along the coast or a grand cruise?'

'Oh, definitely a cruise. Let's see. This one looks nice, or that one over there.'

'The first one.' Snape pointed at the sleek white sailing boat in front of them.

'Yes, I think you're right. That's ours, then. So where would we go? Oh, I know. Let's go to Greece. I've always wanted to see the excavations at Delphi and...'

'I've been to Delphi.'

'Oh, excellent. You can show me around, then. And we can go to Egypt next. I've been to Egypt; I can show you everything.' In her enthusiasm, one of her hands had landed on Snape's arm. She hadn't noticed until he looked at it. He didn't seem to mind, so she left it where it was.

'How long did you plan to travel?'

'I don't know. As long as it takes.'

'Maybe some dinner first, then? There's an excellent little restaurant a bit further down,' Snape suggested.

'Sounds good.'

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Hermione drained the last sip from her coffee cup. It was still warm enough to sit outside, and she was casting around for something that would keep the man opposite her there for a little bit longer.

'It's a lovely evening,' she said.

Snape just looked at her, then he said, 'Would you like to go for a stroll along the Corniche? The view is very nice.'

So Snape didn't want their day together to end, either? The little flutter in her belly told Hermione that she would like that very much indeed. 'Yes, I'd love to.'

They walked along the stone path that started from the *vieux port* and wound around the coastline.

'You were right. Down here, Marseille is a very beautiful city.' Over the water, the sun was slowly sinking, casting everything under a warm, orange glow.

'Let's walk a little further, and then you'll have an excellent view of the *château d'If*,' Snape suggested.

Hermione nodded. 'At least you weren't incarcerated.'

'Not all prisons have walls.'

They reached a little curve and stopped. Snape was right; the view was breathtaking.

They stood watching the ancient castle across the water until the sun had sunk completely. Hermione shivered.

'Are you cold?'

'A bit.'

Snape took off his black leather jacket and dropped it around Hermione's shoulders.

'Thank you.' She turned and found him looking at her. For a while, they remained caught in each other's gaze, then Snape slowly raised one hand to her face and let his fingers trace the curls at her temple. Hermione felt his touch all the way through her body down to her toes. She swallowed, and her heartbeat started to race as his hand moved down the side of her neck. Then his mouth closed the distance between them. His lips were smooth and warm as they met hers. Hermione responded by trailing her tongue over his bottom lip, coaxing a little sigh from Severus before he opened his mouth to her. His hand sneaked through her hair and around to the nape of her neck, drawing her nearer to him and leaving goose-pimples in its wake. Her own arms came up around his back, pulling his warm body even closer to her, while their tongues were caught in a slow, sensual dance.

Eventually, they had to come up for air. They smiled at each other. 'That was nice, for a first kiss,' Hermione said.

Snape's eyebrow was wandering towards his hairline again. 'Just nice? I think we should try again.'

'We definitely should. Just to make sure.'

'Indeed.' With that, their mouths met once more. They tried again several times, during the course of which "nice" was upgraded to "very nice" and eventually to "wow", until it finally became too cold to stand at the water's edge.

They walked back to the harbour area in silence, Severus's arm around Hermione's shoulders.

At the bus stop, she took off his jacket. He refused to take it. 'You'll be cold.'

'Thank you. See you tomorrow?'

'See you tomorrow.'

Back in her hotel room, after a long hot shower, Hermione couldn't sleep. She got up and walked over to the window. For the second night, she stood there, looking out into the dark. She couldn't think of anything but Severus's kisses. And every time she did, her body tingled all over. She took his jacket from the chair she had dropped it on earlier and ran her hands over the soft black material before she buried her face in it. It smelled of leather, of the sea air and of Snape. She sighed. She remained standing at the window a while longer, then she put the jacket on and went back to bed. This time she slept. Soundly.

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# Three

## Chapter 3 of 4

Hermione goes in search of a book. She finds a lot more.

Hermione stepped into the sun-lit street. Immediately, she was accosted by the noises of a busy place just after rush hour. She walked the short distance to the café where she would meet Severus and his contact. The scent of freshly baked bread wafted from the open door of a bakery and mingled with car fumes, the breeze from the sea, and an indistinguishable bouquet of other smells that formed the aroma of the city. She hummed a little tune as she crossed the street, and her step became a little springier. Les Danaïdes was right around the next corner.

Rounding the corner, she could see Severus through the window of the café. Today, he was wearing a white shirt. It looked gorgeous on him, especially in contrast to his black hair. He was talking to a woman. A very pretty woman. Hermione stopped dead in her tracks. He had never mentioned that his contact was female. From what Hermione could see from a distance, she was very slim with even features, large eyes, and straight auburn hair that fell in a lustrous sheen down to her waist. They were talking, and Severus slightly inclined his head, laughing at something she said.

Severus was laughing. With a very pretty woman. Hermione's stomach clenched, then she took a deep breath and walked inside.

She knew that her "bonjour" came out a tad frosty. The woman smiled at her. 'Right, I'd better be going. Remember, not before three this afternoon. If you need anything else, you know where to find me.' She rose and gave Severus a quick peck on each cheek, waved at Hermione and left.

Hermione glared after her.

'There isn't much going on in this city that she doesn't know,' Severus said.

'She's very pretty.'

Severus was watching Hermione closely. 'She is also very much in love with her husband.'

'And I'd want to know that because...?' Hermione snapped.

Severus didn't respond; only a tiny smile quickly flitted across his face.

'So, what's not before three this afternoon?' Hermione asked.

'The chance to meet the man who happens to have a book that very much resembles the one you're looking for,' Severus replied.

'Just like that?'

'Not quite. He's a scholar who occasionally parts with one of his books. He acquired a number of volumes a few days ago, and it seems, according to Martine's sources, yours might be among them.'

'This seems almost too easy. I've been looking for weeks, everywhere, and suddenly the book just turns up.' Hermione did her best not to sound petulant.

'As I said, there isn't much going on in this place Martine doesn't know or couldn't find out.'

'Martine, huh? Good friend of yours?' Hermione tried interrogation level one: polite enquiry, not too interested, the way she had used it often at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. It didn't work.

Severus's mouth was twitching again. 'Not that good. You wouldn't want her as an enemy, though.'

'Right.' Hermione paused, then asked, 'Are you busy this morning?'

'I could take a day off. Was there anything particular you had in mind?'

*Like getting you naked?* Hermione quickly dispelled the delectable images her thought produced, wondering if Severus would mind. 'I... Would you show me your books?'

Severus hesitated a few seconds, then said, 'I suppose I could do that.'

'Do you live far from here?'

'It's a ten minute walk. Shall we?'

Hermione nodded. Together, they left the café and headed for Severus's flat.

The weather was warm again, and the city bristled with colours and activity while the soft breeze reminded them that the sea wasn't far. Hermione's step had become springy again.

Severus lived in what looked like a fairly quiet residential area. His flat was on the top floor of a neo-classical building. He unlocked the door and led the way into a long corridor; at the end of it, a stair leading further up was visible. As soon as she entered the flat, Hermione felt a familiar shift in the air. She turned to Severus. 'There's magic all over the place.'

'Of course there is. What did you expect?'

'But I thought you had gone Muggle.'

Severus stared at her as if she had suddenly grown another head. 'Why on earth would I want to live as a Muggle? Our abilities are a gift; I'd be a fool not to use them. Besides, what did you think I do for a living? Drive a bus?'

He had a point. 'What do you do for a living?'

'I'm a Potions master, remember? I brew for the local wizarding hospital and a number of apothecaries, especially the more complicated potions, and I work with two Healers on a number of new developments. I have a lab upstairs.' He pointed to the stairs at the end of the corridor; his face had become animated while he talked.

Now, it was Hermione who stared. 'You really do like potions, don't you?'

'Yes. I always have, and now I can do the more interesting stuff.'

She nodded, remembering his old book. It made perfect sense. Then another thought occurred to her.

'How come nobody found out about you? she asked. 'The war and everything must have been in the French wizarding papers, as well.'

'I'm not daft enough to use my real name.'

Of course, it figured. 'Right. The books?'

'Through there.' He gestured to a door on his right.

Walking through it, Hermione found herself standing in a large, high-ceilinged living room. Sunlight was flooding in from two tall windows on one wall. The desk standing under one of them was strewn with papers, books, and quills. All the other walls were lined with overflowing bookcases that stretched from floor to ceiling. The centre of the room was occupied by a large and comfy looking leather couch, a matching armchair, and a low wooden table. The atmosphere was warm and cosy, making Hermione feel right at home. She couldn't take her eyes off the bookshelves.

'The Collection is over there.' Severus pointed to the left corner. 'Coffee? Or tea?'

'Tea, please, with milk. I've been longing for a decent cuppa since I stepped off the train,' Hermione answered.

'I know what you mean.' With that, he disappeared.

Hermione walked over to the shelf he had indicated. His collection was about the same size as hers, but he had more foreign books, and some of the volumes looked very old.

By the time Severus returned with two steaming mugs, Hermione was sitting cross-legged on the floor, engrossed in a book of exquisite drawings.

Severus placed the mugs on the table and walked over to her. 'You could sit on the couch, you know. It isn't cursed.'

Hermione looked up to find him smiling at her. Her heart did a little leap at the sight. She got up and pointed at another book. 'That's a first edition, isn't it?'

'Yes, one of only three copies left. The others were destroyed by the authorities shortly after their publication.'

'Honestly, governments are so predictable it's almost boring.' She walked over to the couch, Severus in her wake.

'On the upside, one can hardly ever be disappointed. Is that why you stopped working for the Ministry?'

'That, and because they're a bunch of pricks who can't find their own arses without a map.'

'I see. No love lost, then.' There was a clear note of respect in Severus's voice and the way he looked at her.

'None whatsoever.' Hermione took a sip of tea. 'Oh, this is excellent.'

'Thank you. Have you looked at chapter four? There's some intriguing stuff there.'

Hermione turned to the chapter in question. 'That is... interesting.' She tilted the book sideways and squinted at the drawing again. 'Can you even do that?'

'If you're flexible.' Severus bent over the book as well.

'You'd have to be very flexible,' Hermione pointed out. Severus was sitting so close to her, she could feel his body heat. He smelled very nice again. Experimentally, she leaned against him, her head on his shoulder.

His arm came round her waist, and they continued to look through the book together. A few pages later, she put her hand on his chest and started to draw little circles with her thumb. In response, his own thumb begun to make a similar pattern on her belly, sending pleasant little shivers all the way down to her toes.

When they had finished looking through the book, Hermione's hand went to the side of Severus's neck, lightly stroking up and down; she stretched her head up and touched her mouth to his. His lips were warm and smooth; it didn't take long before their tongues found out that they still liked to tangle with each other. Repeatedly.

After a while, Severus's lips moved to her neck; she tilted her head to give him better access, and felt his hand sneak under her t-shirt, caressing her bare belly and slowly creeping upwards.

'Shit,' she exclaimed.

Severus raised his head from her neck. 'That isn't the reaction I was aiming for.'

Hermione wordlessly pointed to the clock on one of the shelves.

'Fuck.' They both scrambled up at the same time and bumped their heads, landing in an undignified tangle on the couch again.

'Ow. Sorry. You all right?'

'Yes, sorry.'

This time they managed to get up. Hermione grabbed her bag and Severus a jacket before they rushed downstairs to the bus stop.

They were lucky to catch a bus just as it was about to leave.

'Where are we going?'

'Noailles.'

They fell silent as the bus left the city centre, making its way into a different area. When they got off the bus, the window displays and signs on the shops had changed. Many of them were in Arabic letters, and the shops were selling hummus and bulgur rather than crêpes and baguettes. The whole area felt more Northern African than French, and Hermione would have loved nothing better than to go and explore, but they were late as it was.

Severus stopped in front of a small tea-room. 'Let me do the talking.'

'Why? Don't you think I can take care of myself?'

Severus looked confused for a second. 'Of course you can. That's not the point. Martine has vouched for me, not for you.'

'Oh, right.'

Inside, groups of men were sitting around tables, drinking tea from small glasses. Some of them were talking, some were reading newspapers, some were playing a board game. All heads turned to Hermione when they entered but quickly went back to what they were doing when Severus levelled a glare at them. He stepped up to the counter and asked the man behind something in a language Hermione couldn't understand. He nodded and pointed to a table in the back corner of the room. Severus walked over

there, asking Hermione with the merest inclination of his head to follow him.

A young, black-haired man sat there, reading a book. When Severus approached him, he stood up, and the two men shook hands. Motioning for Severus and Hermione to follow him, he disappeared through a doorway that was closed off with a beaded curtain from the main room. They descended a few steps into a long corridor. Rounding a corner, they found themselves in another corridor, darker than the first but just as long, sloping steadily downward, leading them further beneath the building. After what seemed to Hermione like a very long time, they stopped in front of a stretch of blank wall. Their guide murmured something, making a wooden door appear. He nodded once, gesturing for Severus and Hermione to step inside. Behind the door was a spacious, well-lit room, its walls covered with overflowing bookshelves. In the middle of it stood a large, dark desk. The man sitting behind it, bent over a scroll of parchment, appeared to be very, very old. Hermione suspected he must be the oldest person she'd ever met, if his age was what his appearance seemed to suggest, but then it was hard to tell with wizards. He was clad in a set of pristine white robes, his head covered with a black scarf. His face was wrinkled, the skin stretched over his cheekbones; his eyes when he looked up at them were of a keen and lively intelligence. The two men exchanged what seemed to be a respectful greeting. After a conversation, in what Hermione had meanwhile identified as Arabic, the old wizard stood up and limped over to one of the shelves. He took down a book, wrapped in cloth. Severus gestured to Hermione to take a look. She stepped over to them and peered inside the cloth, her heart beating rapidly. She saw an ancient book, bound in black leather. There were the beautiful arabesques on the cover, the Malfoy crest, and some runes woven artfully into it. 'It looks like the right one,' she said.

Severus didn't give a sign that he had heard her; a rapid exchange between him and the other man followed, during the course of which both repeatedly pointed at the book. Finally, Severus turned to Hermione and said, 'Two-hundred-and-fifty Eurogalleons.'

Hermione pulled the money out of her bag and handed it to Severus, who gave it to their business partner. With a further flourish of words, the two men shook hands before the old man opened the door with a wave of his hand. They had barely stepped through it when it vanished noiselessly, leaving only a stretch of blank wall behind.

The younger man had been waiting to escort them back upstairs. A few yards into the street, Severus stopped and handed Hermione the wrapped book. She beamed at him. 'I can't believe we've got it. I'll still have to confirm that it's genuine, but I'm almost sure. Thank you so much!' She put his arms around him and kissed him.

Severus kissed her back for a few seconds before he peeled her arms off him. 'Much as I like this, my reputation around this area will be ruined if you behave like that, and I need to be able to come here again to buy potions ingredients.'

Hermione narrowed her eyes. 'Your reputation? What exactly was that last bit of conversation about?'

Severus's mouth was twitching again. 'He congratulated me on the beauty of my wife but said you looked like a handful.'

'Your... A handful, eh? You'd better watch it!' She started grinning as well.

'Or what?'

'Or else.' She cuffed his upper arm lightly.

'Oh, now I'm scared.'

'You'd better be.' Now, they were both laughing. It was the first time Hermione had ever heard Severus laugh. It was a lovely sound; a warm feeling started to spread through her.

While they were waiting for the bus to take them back to the city centre, she said, 'I didn't know you spoke Arabic.'

'Some of the oldest potions texts are in Arabic, and I like to be able to look at the original since translations tend to be garbled.'

'I know. That's why I learned Latin, so that I could read the originals of some of the older Charms books.'

Sitting on the bus, Hermione realised that now that they had found the book, Severus had no reason to agree to meeting her again. Her stomach clenched at the thought.

'Look, can I buy you dinner? As a thank you for all your help with the book? I'd never have been able to get it so quickly without you. I know it sounds awfully touristy, but I've wanted to try a Bouillabaisse, and maybe you know a good place for it and would like to come?'

'I'd love to have dinner with you. How do you feel about cooking?' Severus asked.

'Cooking?' Hermione had no idea what he was on about.

'Most of the stuff they sell as Bouillabaisse in restaurants is rather horrible. Why don't we get some fish and make our own? I've a fairly decent recipe at home,' he clarified.

Hermione beamed at him. 'Sounds perfect!'

'There's a market near my flat this afternoon. They should have everything we need,' Severus said.

A number of enticing smells wafted under their noses as they walked through the rows of stalls displaying freshly caught fish and seafood, all kinds of fruits and vegetables, meat, various kinds of cheese, wine, or freshly baked bread.

Hermione watched as Severus chose the fish, vegetables and herbs with care...the same concentration on his face she remembered from her Potions lessons. He picked up a bunch of thyme and held it up to his impressive nose. Obviously satisfied with the result, he turned it around and inspected it closely before he ripped off one of the leaves. After he had rubbed it between his thumb and his forefinger, he smelled it again.

He held out the bunch to Hermione. 'Smell this.'

'Smells good.'

'It does. You can buy ready *madebouquets garnis*, but I prefer to make my own.'

He bought the thyme together with a number of other herbs. Hermione usually hated shopping for food, but this was fun: the colours, the smells, and the man at her side. They picked up some fresh bread as well, then Severus asked, 'What would you like for dessert?'

*How about a Potions master?* Hermione thought but said, 'Anything you'd recommend?'

He looked at her with a rather hungry expression on his face that made her insides turn to jelly. 'Let's get some of the strawberries; they look delicious.'

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Back at the flat, Severus disappeared into the kitchen while Hermione took the book out of her bag to check it. She unwrapped it and put it in front of her on the low table. Running her wand over it a few times, she frowned and tried again. It was Malfoy's book. Still, something felt off. She picked it up, flipped through it, and weighed in her hand. Judging by its size, it should have been heavier. She ran her wand over it again with the same result. A third attempt with different spells produced no different outcome. She turned the book in her hands and was reminded by a low rumble from her stomach that her last meal had been breakfast. Still, what was up with the book? Had she missed something obvious? She ran her fingers along the seams of the binding. Nothing. Rubbing her tired eyes, Hermione decided to postpone the question. The book wasn't going anywhere, and the kitchen with a certain wizard in it seemed to be the better place for now. She wrapped the book in the cloth again and put it back

into her bag before she walked over into the kitchen.

Severus was busy chopping tomatoes when she came in.

'All right?'

'I don't know. The scans confirm that it is Malfoy's book, but something feels off about it, though I can't put my finger on it.'

'Do you want me to take a look?' Severus offered.

'That would be great. Another pair of eyes never hurts. But let's eat first. What can I do?' Hermione asked.

'You could peel the onions,' he said, handing her the vegetables.

Hermione nodded and set to work. Severus moved on to clean the fish, heat olive oil in a pot with a wave of his wand, and peel cloves of garlic.

Hermione's eyes followed his hands as they moved, cut, stirred. His fingers were long and elegant and worked with the same meticulous precision she had seen so many years ago when he was working with Potions ingredients. Come to think of it, they had felt very nice on her belly a few hours ago as well...

'Hermione?' Her eyes snapped back to Severus's face.

'Yes?'

'I really need those onions.'

Hermione saw her knife lying forgotten next to a half-peeled onion. 'Erm... Sorry, got distracted.'

'I noticed,' Severus said. 'Why don't you just relax and let me cook?' He pointed his wand at the neglected onions; they obediently soared out of their skins and onto his cutting board where he quickly diced them before throwing them into the sizzling oil.

'Sorry, cooking isn't really my forte,' Hermione mumbled.

'I'd never have guessed.'

Hermione continued to watch him work. 'Why do you do so much of this by hand? Wouldn't it be easier to simply use your wand?'

'Because some things need to be done manually to achieve the best results. It takes more time, but it's worth the effort.'

'So, no foolish wand-waving in cooking either,' Hermione said with a smile.

For a moment, Severus looked puzzled. 'Oh, that. That seems such a long time ago. But, yes, that's one way of putting it.'

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'This looks gorgeous.' Hermione watched as Severus levitated the opened bottle of wine onto the table. A bowl of steaming broth sat next to a basket with freshly cut bread and a smaller bowl of *rouille*. The fish, seafood, vegetables, and potatoes were neatly arranged onto a large platter and kept under a warming charm. The delicious aroma of herbs and spices reminded her how hungry she was.

They began with the broth, accompanied by slices of bread with *rouille*. After they had finished their first course, they ate their way through the fish and vegetables.

Hermione lay down her fork with a little sigh. 'That was absolutely delicious. You're a marvellous cook.'

'Thank you. Shall we take our dessert up to the roof garden? It should still be warm enough.'

'You have a roof garden?'

'Upstairs.'

'Excellent. That means I get to see your lab, as well.' Hermione took the two glasses and a new bottle of wine and went for the stairs.

'You might be disappointed,' Severus muttered, following her with the bowl of strawberries.

At the top of the stairs, she found herself in a small, well-kept potions lab. A row of clean cauldrons stood on a ledge over a washbasin. Two of the other walls were lined with shelves of jars and glasses in which all kinds of potions ingredients were visible. The middle of the room was taken up by a workbench, its surface empty and clean. Hermione looked around: no gently simmering cauldrons with interestingly wafting fumes, no scrolls of parchment with notes on his latest experiments, no mysterious ingredients on the table ready to be tipped into a simmering cauldron. It actually was a bit of a letdown.

The roof garden more than made up for it. It was so tiny that a small bench and an even smaller table took up all the space, but the view over the city was spectacular. They sat quietly for a bit, drinking their wine and nibbling at the strawberries until Hermione moved closer to Severus. Leaning against him, she held one of the red fruits up to his mouth. He picked it delicately from her fingertips and then held one out in turn for her. When Hermione took it, she kept his two fingers in her mouth and started to gently swirl her tongue around them.

Severus pulled his fingers slowly out of her mouth and bent over to her. He tasted of wine and strawberries as he pulled her closer to him. She brought one of her hands up to stroke the nape of his neck while his fingers gently combed through her bushy mane. She broke the kiss to feed him another strawberry; in turn, he offered her a sip of wine before their lips met again.

His hand found its way back under her shirt and continued to stroke her where he had left off that afternoon, slowly moving upwards and sending pleasant little shivers through Hermione, which pooled in her lower belly. Severus placed little kisses on the corner of her mouth, along her jaw and her temple before he proceeded to nibble at her earlobe. His hand was now stroking her breast through the lacy fabric of her bra, which produced a little sigh from her. Good thing this morning she had chosen the prettier of the two bras she had brought with her.

"This morning" seemed like a very long time ago after a day of running around. In the same clothes. And in much warmer weather than she was used to at this time of year. Ew.

'Look, this is all very nice, but I feel a bit sticky...'

Severus stiffened in an instant. He withdrew his hand and moved away from her as far as the small bench allowed. 'If you want to go back to your hotel, just say so. You don't have to feel you have to repay me or something.'

Hermione glared at him. 'There's no need to insult me. If you want me to leave, just say it,' she snapped.

Severus stared at her, expressions she couldn't read quickly flitting over his face. Finally, he said, 'I don't want you to leave.'

'Fine. I said I'm feeling a bit sticky. What I meant was, I'm feeling a bit sticky.'

'Sorry.' His voice was so low, she could barely hear him.

'It's getting cold out here.' Hermione stood up and gathered their glasses; the mood was ruined, anyway. She didn't wait to see if Severus followed her.

Downstairs, she slammed the glasses on the kitchen counter so hard that one of them broke. With an absent wave of her hand, she restored it to its original form. How could anyone so brilliant be such a bloody idiot? Or so insecure, which didn't make him any less of an idiot.

'Sorry.'

Without a word, she stalked past him, gathered her bag and left, taking care to bang the door behind her.

Her anger lasted until she stood in the empty street, realising that she would never see him again. Her job was done; she had the book. Tomorrow, she would return to London, hand the book over to Lucius Malfoy, and get on with her life. It was better this way.

Rain started to fall. Not a soft spring drizzle but a veritable downpour. She ducked into the next entrance. She watched the drops falling in rapid succession, splashing on the pavement and producing little torrents before they settled down into a puddle. The puddles looked inky-black in the rain-dimmed streetlights. Inky-black like a pair of eyes. Eyes that could hold a whole room full of grown men in check. Eyes that glittered with intelligence and amusement. Eyes that had just looked at her with a longing so intense that just thinking about it had her catch her breath.

Hermione turned and ran back the way she had just come. By the time she reached Severus's building, she was completely drenched. She climbed the five flights of stairs and started pounding at his door. When he opened the door and saw her standing there, Severus's face lit up.

'You're an idiot,' she said, putting her arms around him.

He pulled her close, cold and dripping as she was and just held her for a moment.

'I do have a bathroom, you know,' he whispered in her ear.

'With a shower?'

'Mmh.'

'Care to join me?'

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In the bathroom, they stood in front of the shower cubicle looking at each other, neither of them moving a finger until Hermione slowly ran her hand up Severus's chest and started to unbutton his shirt, kissing and stroking every inch of skin she exposed. Judging by the little noises he was making, he seemed to like it.

In return, he pulled her shirt up. She helpfully stretched her arms upward so that he could pull it over her head, leaving her clad only in her bra and jeans. She could feel his eyes caressing her skin before his hands followed, making her tingle all over.

Hermione pushed his shirt off his shoulders, leaving his upper torso bare, then she quickly unclasped her bra. Severus's hands cupping her breasts felt wonderful. Her nipples perked up under his attention before he pulled her into his arms once more.

His mouth on hers felt every bit as good as it had before, as did his hands roaming over her bare back.

'This is wonderful, but I really do want that shower,' she mumbled into his ear a considerable while later.

'I know.' With a wave of his hand, the rest of their clothes disappeared. Hermione gasped as she felt his naked body against hers. Maybe that shower could wait, after all.

Severus reached around her to turn on the water. It felt pleasantly warm, running down her body. She stretched under it to relax her tense muscles; Severus's mouth on her neck and shoulder helped considerably to relieve any remaining tension.

A very nice smell was drifting into her nose, an enticing mixture of something herbal and lemony.

'Mmmh, very nice. What's that?'

'Shampoo and shower gel.'

'I don't think I have ever smelled anything similar before.' Gentle hands were shampooing her hair and massaging her scalp. She almost purred.

'It's my own mixture.' He proceeded to wash her body, especially her breasts, which seemed to need a lot of attention. Hot wetness was pooling between her legs; judging from what was pressing into her backside, Severus seemed to be enjoying the shower, as well. For a second, she wondered if he had ever done this before, remembering the things Harry had told her. She quickly forgot what she was thinking as his teeth nibbled at her earlobe.

His hands spread shower gel over her belly, moving up her sides before they went down again and finally reached the place where she wanted them so urgently. Nimble fingers teased, stroked and explored. Hermione moaned and pressed her bum against him.

She felt him nudging her legs apart. She happily obliged, bending forward a bit and bracing her hands on the shower wall. It took them a bit of fumbling, making her think that there were probably better places to be doing this, then all thought was quickly lost as she felt him push slowly inside her. He remained still for a moment, then started to move slowly while his thumb stroked her between the legs. It felt wonderful, making her moan with delight.

Soon, she was pushing back against him. 'Harder!'

The request was repeated a few times, and then she was drowning in sensation.

Her legs were shaking when she became aware of the tiles beneath her feet again, and her skin felt wrinkly from the water that was still pouring down on them. Behind her, Severus was breathing heavily, his arm still around her.

She leaned back against him, yawning.

Severus briefly nuzzled her neck. 'Bed?'

'Excellent.'

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*A/N: Eurogalleons are my invention, assuming that the wizarding world has adopted a similar system of currencies as the Muggle one. According to JKR, one Galleon roughly equals five Pounds. The sum Hermione pays is based on the assumption that the exchange rate of Galleons to Eurogalleons would be similar to that of the British Pound to the Euro.*

*Many thanks to Melusin, Anogete and Chivalric for their fabulous beta and alpha reading skills.*

## Four

*Chapter 4 of 4*

Hermione goes in search of a book. She finds a lot more.

*Many thanks to Melusin for beta reading. Additional thanks to Chivalric for commenting and holding my hand through the writing of this story.*

*The Potterverse belongs to JKR; I only take them out to play.*

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Something tickled her nose. Still half-asleep, Hermione turned her head and snuggled back into the pillow. The pillow moved.

Her eyes flew open to stare at a rather nice male chest. Oh, right. Severus. She had... he had... and then they had. And then again. A smile spread over her face. Placing a kiss on the nipple that greeted her, she disentangled herself from the duvet and Severus's legs to go to the loo. A teeth cleaning charm seemed to be in order, too.

On her way back through the corridor, she met Severus. He looked as sleepy as she felt, his hair dishevelled.

'Erm,' he said, his eyes not quite meeting hers.

'Erm,' she said, remembering suddenly that she was very naked and that her hair probably looked like a bird's nest.

Silence.

Finally, Hermione drew a deep breath, took two steps towards him, and planted her lips on his cheek.

'Good morning,' she whispered.

Severus's arms came around her. 'Good morning. Sleep well?'

A warm wave of relief swept through her. 'Very. Are you coming back to bed?'

'Just give me a few minutes,' Severus answered, nuzzling her hair with his nose.

Back in the bedroom, Hermione crawled under the duvet, yawned, and promptly fell asleep again.

When she opened her eyes some time later, it was to find Severus sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing chequered pyjama bottoms and smiling at her. 'Hello there, sleepyhead. What would you like for breakfast?'

'Hello.' She blinked up at him. 'These aren't black.' She placed a kiss on the small of his back before her hand sneaked under the waistband. 'And they're in the way.'

Severus inhaled sharply. 'I do own clothes in other colours.'

'Mmm, I know. I've seen your white shirt. Still, black suits you.' The hand went exploring further.

Severus gasped. 'I suppose that means breakfast can wait.'

Hermione grinned and pulled him down to her.

Breakfast took a while.

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Hermione ran her wand once more over the book. The result was the same as the night before and the three times she had tried previously. Again, she picked the book up and turned it around in her hands. There was nothing new to discover. She sighed.

Severus wandered into the living room, a mug in his hand. 'You could just return the damn book to Lucius and be done with it.'

Hermione looked up. 'I could. But something's off, and I want to know why.'

'Why doesn't that surprise me? May I?' He extended a hand towards the book.

Hermione nodded. Giving him the book, she said, 'And I want to find out if it's something Dark.'

'Since it's Lucius, we...'

Two things happened as Severus touched the book: a brief flash of light, and then it transformed before their eyes. It shrank slightly; the binding became smoother, and the arabesque on the cover changed its shape into a new, even more intricately woven design with a faint silver glow.

'Now, that is interesting,' Severus said.

'What do you think just happened?' Hermione asked.

'No idea.'

Both stared at the book.

'Something must have activated a spell.'



'Hm. It changed when you touched it,' Hermione observed.

'But I've touched it before and nothing happened.'

They continued to look at the book Severus was holding gingerly in his hand. Hermione pondered what he had just said.

'No, you didn't.'

'Sorry?'

'You didn't touch the book before. It was always wrapped,' Hermione pointed out.

'Right. So why would my touch trigger the spell that caused the transformation when yours wouldn't?'

'It would have to be something that makes you different from me. Let's see. It could be because you're male. Or because you used to wear the Dark Mark. Or...' She shook her head. 'This isn't getting us anywhere. It's all speculation because we have no way to test our theories.'

'I agree. I think we should concentrate on the book itself.'

'Seeing that this book belongs to Lucius Malfoy, I suggest we check for more booby traps,' Hermione suggested.

Severus nodded. After he had placed the book carefully on the table, they both ran their wands over it.

'Nothing.'

'No, definitely no more catches,' Hermione agreed. 'Let's take a look inside. See if that's changed, too.'

She took the book from the table and opened it. The family tree and the detailed descriptions, listing every member of the Malfoy family...their births, life stories, and deaths...were gone. Instead, page after page was filled with an elegant script. The same handwriting that was on the contract Lucius Malfoy had signed. 'This seems to be a diary.'

She turned another page, which contained a drawing. Hermione took a closer look. 'Oh.'

'What is it?'

Hermione didn't answer right away but read a few of the entries.

'Well?'

'It seems to be indeed a diary. Lucius Malfoy's diary.'

'Let me see.' Severus peered over her shoulder. She turned a few pages so that he could see the content. 'Damn you, Lucius,' he murmured.

'This is what I think it is, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'So, Lucius Malfoy has sent me halfway across the continent, chasing after a diary that contains meticulous records of all his little trysts.' Hermione flung the diary back on the table and started to pace the length of Severus's living room. The book slid off the table, turning twice around its axis before it landed on the floor, open, its spine pointing upward.

Hermione stopped her frantic pacing to pick it up. She glanced at the open page and froze. She stared at it for a while, then she sat down and flipped through the rest of the book until she stopped at another page that caught her attention. She raised her head. 'You're in this book.'

Severus came to sit next to her on the couch. 'I suspected as much.'

She showed him the page on which he and Lucius were pleasuring a dark-haired woman. 'Please, tell me that isn't Bellatrix Lestrange.'

Severus made a disgusted noise and shook his head. 'No. There are some things even Lucius wouldn't do.'

'These drawings are very elaborate.'

'Yes, Lucius is a man of many talents.'

Hermione looked at the drawing again. The woman was comfortably reclining on a large bed, the head of much younger Lucius visible between her legs, while Severus was sucking her nipple, his hand playing with her other breast. As Hermione watched, Severus's image placed kisses on the woman's neck before he moved to her other nipple. A little pang was tugging at her heartstrings. It was one thing to assume that Severus would have had a shag at some point in his life, to have visible proof of it felt...she wasn't sure how it felt.

'Did you do that regularly?'

'No. A few times,' Severus answered.

'Did you like it?'

Severus hesitated. 'It was nice,' he said very quietly, looking anywhere but at her.

She sidled a bit closer to him on the couch, leaning her head on his shoulder. They remained sitting like that for a bit before one of his hands wandered under the shirt she had borrowed from him that morning.

His touch on her skin felt oddly reassuring, allowing Hermione to get back to the question of the diary. 'Do you think that's why the book transformed at your touch?'

The hand stopped playing with her breast. 'Huh? Oh, the book. I don't know.'

Hermione looked at the drawing again, trying not to become diverted by Severus's caresses and what the two men in the image were doing. Slowly, things began to fall into place. 'It was Lucius.'

'Sorry?'

'Lucius saved your life. In the Shrieking Shack, didn't he?'

Now, she had Severus's attention. 'Yes.'

'So, you owe him a life debt, and you two have a history.'

Severus was silent for a moment. 'Yes.'

'Exactly how close are you?'

'Close. He was the only real friend I had.'

'So I see. Had?'

'I spent nearly two years at his French estate after the war. We disagreed about my travel plans. I haven't seen Lucius in nearly eight years,' Severus explained.

'That must have been some disagreement,' Hermione observed.

'It was.' He didn't offer any more information. Instead, he asked, 'How is he these days?'

'I don't really know. Ginny sees more of him than I do since he's her father-in-law, but I think he's a bit lonely. Ginny and Draco live in London, and Narcissa left him shortly after the war.'

Severus nodded. 'I know. It was blow for him. Regardless of what the diary seems to imply, he's very much a family man.'

'That's what Ginny says, too. They get on reasonably well. I think she's even come to like him.'

'He can be very likeable if he wants to be. And from what I gathered, he genuinely regrets many of the things that happened.'

Hermione shook her head. 'I still find that very hard to believe, but even I can see that he tries.'

She thought about what Severus had just said. 'So, he saved your life, which means you owe him a life debt, and you two are, or were, very close. Hm. That still doesn't explain why the book would reveal itself to you. Unless...'

'Unless?'

'...it's keyed to your magical signature. I've come across similar spells in my work. People would charm an object so that it would only respond to the specific magic of another person and transform into something else. Apparently, it used to be rather common...either as a gift to a friend or a loved one or as a way of getting rid of your enemies.'

'That makes sense, yes. And Lucius would definitely know about this type of magic. But why?'

'I know. This opens up more questions than it answers.'

Since Severus didn't add anything to that observation, Hermione turned her attention back to the book and continued to flip through it. A tiny nagging reminded her that, strictly speaking, reading someone else's diary wasn't right. She ignored it, too intrigued by Lucius's entries and the drawings that accompanied a number of them. Contrary to what she had thought at first, he appeared to have recorded events that had been important to him: his wedding, Draco's birth, Draco's first flight on a toy broom, family picnics as well as erotic adventures. A surprising number of entries had Severus in them. Lucius seemed to have considered him an important part of his life, judging by the space he was given in the diary. She had to admit that Lucius was a good writer. And a good artist. She looked again at one of the pages that showed Severus and Lucius with a woman and couldn't resist reading what he had written. Lucius definitely had a way with words. And not only with words, it seemed.

What would it be like to be the woman on the bed?

A sudden wave of heat went through her body, leaving a conflagration in its wake as her eyes returned to the drawing, fixing on Severus's naked body, the way his hands moved, his hair falling forward over his face with the tips grazing the two thin white scars on his neck.

The two thin white scars. A niggling thought tried to get through the lust-filled haze in her brain: the scars, the book.

'This is after the war,' she said.

'Yes.'

'Hm. How long did you say it took you to recover from the snakebite?'

'About a year. Why? I've already told you that.'

'So this would be roughly, what? Fourteen months after Voldemort's fall? One-and-a-half years?'

Severus glanced at the page. 'I suppose. Are you going to tell me at some point what you're on about?'

'How come Lucius still had this book to write in when it was allegedly confiscated by the Ministry a year before?'

They looked at each other.

'That would mean...'

'Exactly,' Severus confirmed.

Closing the book with a snap, Hermione said, 'I think it's time I had a word with my client.'

Severus pulled her closer. 'Let's not be hasty. You might want to think about how best to approach this,' he murmured into her hair.

Hermione snuggled into his embrace. 'Mmmh, any suggestions?'

'Why don't you get your things from the hotel, and we'll take a day or two to plan? The book isn't going anywhere.' His mouth trailed little kisses from her ear down the side of her neck.

She tilted her head to give him better access. 'Sounds like a reasonable plan to me,' she said.

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The house-elf led Hermione through to the garden. The little she could see of the large country house, or rather mansion, she amended her observation, looked as grand as expected but surprisingly cosy at the same time.

A garden table surrounded by two chairs and a bench stood in the middle of a stone terrace that looked out over the grounds. Lucius was sitting on one of the chairs, reading, a cup of coffee in front of him. He rose when Hermione stepped out onto the terrace.

'Good afternoon, Miss Granger. Thank you for coming. The weather is so nice, I thought we could sit outside. Would you care for a cup of coffee? Or do you prefer tea?'

'Good afternoon, Mr Malfoy. Coffee is fine, thank you.'

He waited until Hermione was seated on the bench before he sat down again. A cup of coffee appeared in front of her. She took in her surroundings, the view over miles and miles of slightly curved hills full of green vineyards. It was pleasantly warm with the soft breeze smelling of spring.

Lucius gave her time to take a sip from her drink before he said, 'You have good news, I presume?'

'Yes.' Hermione took the wrapped book out of her bag and handed it to Lucius.

He peeled the cloth back and pulled out the heavy tome bound in ancient black leather. He turned it around in his hands, examining it from all sides. Hermione tried to breathe regularly as she watched him closely. A frown had begun to appear on the wizard's face. He ran his hands over the title page and finally opened the book, flicking through a few pages before he closed it again.

'I'm afraid this isn't the right book, Miss Granger. It seems you have been misled.'

'That is strange. The book looks exactly as you described it to me. Maybe you forgot to mention a significant detail?' Hermione asked.

'I'm afraid, Miss Granger, this isn't the book I was looking for.'

There was a slight shift in the air as Severus Apparated right onto the terrace. He strode over to Lucius. 'Perhaps this is what you were looking for?' he asked, dangling the diary before the other wizard's eyes.

For a second, Lucius looked even paler than usual. 'Severus.'

'Lucius. You're getting sloppy. The wards still recognise me.'

'I suspected you'd be back at some point.' He rose.

'Did you, now?'

Hermione watched the two men standing motionless, staring at each other, tension palpable in the air.

Silence stretched between the two wizards.

Then Lucius nodded once, briefly. 'Severus,' he said again.

Severus inclined his head a fraction of an inch. 'Lucius.' Then, he extended his hand.

Lucius took it, holding it still for just a moment before they shook hands. 'It's been a long time,' he said in a voice Hermione had never heard from him before.

'Yes,' Severus agreed. The two remained standing across from each other for a moment longer, unspoken things passing between them.

'Men,' Hermione muttered under her breath as she continued to watch them.

Two pairs of eyes turned to look at her, one black and one pale eyebrow wandering upward. She smiled sweetly at them.

'Fancy a cup of coffee?' Lucius asked.

'That would be nice,' Severus replied, folding his form onto the bench next to Hermione.

When they were all settled with their cups, Lucius looked at the pair sitting across the table from him. 'Thank you, Miss Granger, Severus. I can't begin to tell you what a joy it is to be re-united with such a precious family heirloom.'

Severus snorted.

Hermione felt anger rising inside her. 'Mr Malfoy, I'm a bit confused as to which book you're referring to, now, since you claim the genealogy wasn't the book I was supposed to find. The other book,' she indicated the book Lucius was holding in his hand, 'is hardly a genealogy. With a fair stretch of the imagination, I'd be willing to call it a chronology of sorts.'

Lucius smiled. 'Let's start with this, shall we?' He pointed his wand at the genealogy on the table. *Finite Incantatem.* The book returned to the novel it had been before she and Severus had Transfigured it to look like Lucius's fake genealogy.

'What matters is that you've found what I was searching for, so we don't need to bother ourselves with overanalysing trivial little details,' he continued.

Hermione fought down the urge to hex the smug little smile from his face. 'One should never overlook the importance of little details,' she said instead. 'Why don't we start with the question, how it is possible that you still had this book to write in when it was supposed to have been confiscated by the Ministry a year previously?'

'I'm sure I've no idea what you're talking about, Miss Granger,' Lucius replied smoothly.

'And of course, you accidentally misplaced the document that listed the items that were confiscated by the Ministry,' Severus added.

'Unfortunately, that is the case, yes. With the many changes in our world, only for the better I might add, I had so many things to take care of.'

This was not getting them anywhere, Hermione realised. She tried a different approach. 'Let me present you with a little hypothesis: for whatever reason, you employed me to find your book and then left a trail of breadcrumbs that would indeed lead me to it. So it looks like things went as you planned. What would interest me is: what do you have to gain from it?'

Lucius shrugged. 'A most interesting speculation but nothing more. Why would I risk the loss of something dear to me for a little entertainment?'

'But things didn't go exactly as planned, did they?' Severus interjected. 'You had found out where I was, and Wizarding Marseille is a very small community.'

'I think you counted on the fact that Hermione would sooner or later come across Martine. Martine was in on this, wasn't she? She was supposed to lead Hermione to me to help her with the search for the book.'

'But Hermione met me first, and Martine had to improvise. Still, it largely worked. We found your book and, as you had planned, it Transfigured back to its original form as soon as I touched it. Did you hope I'd be so angry to find myself in that book that I'd come running to confront you?'

Lucius remained very still for some time.

He picked up his cup, apparently realised that it was empty and set it down again; for a while, he didn't look at anything in particular before he said, very softly, 'It wasn't

your anger I was hoping for.'

Hermione had followed the conversation between the two wizards closely. More and more pieces of the puzzle began to form a picture. 'No. Not anger. Whatever your disagreement was about, it was something that you said or did that made Severus leave, wasn't it? You hoped the diary would remind him of the good things you shared, make him aware of what he was missing.'

'Ginny wasn't wrong when she said you were brilliant.' Lucius looked almost defeated.

Hermione didn't know what to say. It seemed that Ginny had been correct. Lucius was lonely, very lonely, and he had apparently missed his friend so much that he had invested inordinate amounts of money and planning to get him back into his life. It made him seem less arrogant, even likeable. She suddenly realised that she would go to similar lengths to keep Severus in her life. A warm feeling spread through her.

Lucius's eyes darted between Severus and her. 'You two seem to get along rather well.'

'We do,' Severus said. 'You know, most people would have simply sent an owl.'

Lucius shrugged. 'How mundane.'

His statement made Hermione smile. He certainly wasn't boring. She still didn't appreciate the way he had tricked her, but she was willing to admit that his motives had been genuine, even endearing, though she wouldn't tell him that. Besides, he had paid her well.

'I have an excellent new vintage you might like to try,' Lucius offered.

'Your vintages are always worth a try,' Severus answered.

'Or, you could come for dinner.' Lucius turned to Hermione, including her in the invitation.

To her surprise, dinner with Lucius sounded like a good idea. She felt Severus's arm coming to rest around her shoulder. She liked that idea, too. Leaning into his touch, Hermione exchanged a brief look with him before she said, 'That would be lovely.'

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With an almost inaudible noise, they materialised in Severus's living room again.

'Do you have to go back to London right away?' Severus asked.

Hermione didn't know what to say. The thought of leaving made her throat feel very tight all of a sudden. Would he even want her to stay? She looked at him. His face was unreadable, but his eyes told her all she needed to know.

She put her arms around him and pulled him close to her. 'London can wait.'

~\*~fin~\*~