

The Snake's Head Fritillary

by pyjamapants

Lucius Malfoy is plagued by the delivery of several suspicious packages. Auror Hermione Granger is sent to investigate.

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Chapter 1 of 10

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A/N: This was written for the first ever LM/HG exchange for Shiv5468. My undying thanks to betas of dreams Dreamy_Dragon and Persevero for some extremely spectacular work under the duress of constant hunger from food porn. Kudos as well to Blue_Paris for advice on hand-to-hand combat. Prompts will be listed after the last chapter.

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Lucius Malfoy stared out the window of his study. This month's accounts lay abandoned on his desk. The contracts Draco had sent yesterday were untouched as well. He'd received another mysterious package yesterday afternoon and could focus on nothing else since. After reporting the incident to the Auror office *again*, he'd been assured that today they would finally be sending someone to investigate.

Death threats and harassment were a sporadic, but seemingly unending, annoyance since the war. Supporters of the former Dark Lord fancied him a traitor; and those on the other side were angered that his family had survived relatively unscathed. He'd visited Diagon Alley once in three years. Sneers, scowls, and spitting had been a steep price for the visit, even if it did include acquiring a new wand a rather ... challenging task for both parties involved in that exchange. Oh, his Galleons were still accepted everywhere, and he had no difficulty resuming his business dealings, hampered though they'd been by housing the Dark Lord and his followers. But publicly, one was simply not seen tolerating Lucius Malfoy.

He was interrupted from his unpleasant reverie by his house-elf Tildy. 'Excuse us, master. A Miss Hermione Granger is outside the front door waiting to see you.'

'Are you quite certain, Tildy?' *Whatever business could that girl have with me?*

'Oh, I am certain, master. She's got Auror's robes on and showed me her badge when she was introducing herself.'

'Let her in, then, Tildy.'

Oh, shit. The Ministry had sent *her*. He was well and truly fucked. Lucius flicked his wand and shut the doors to the drawing room. He'd had every inch of the manor redecorated since the war and again when Narcissa had left him, but he was quite certain that walking past the drawing room would *not* put her in the mood to deal with the suspicious packages.

He was quite accustomed to home visits from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He'd got to know their routine quite well in the days before he'd been shipped off to Azkaban, sprung, and forced to house the Dark Lord and his assorted minions. Prior to his incarceration, Auror investigations had lasted hours. They'd searched his

home with ruthless precision, attempting to poke their noses in every nook and cranny to uncover his reported trove of Dark artefacts. He was well aware of the protocol for investigations involving the Dark Arts, yet he'd never thought he'd be chagrined not to see its meticulous execution.

These days, Aurors swanned into his home as if they owned the place. Of course, they very nearly did own the manor; thank Merlin, his solicitor had succeeded in preventing the Ministry from going *that* far.

Over time, the Aurors had converged on an unofficial, but universally followed, protocol for Malfoy investigations post-war: waltz in; sneer at the centuries-old family artefacts; rattle off two or three questions about whatever threats had arisen this time; imply that the situation was entirely Lucius's fault given his past as a Death Eater; whinge as if performing a Herculean feat; deliver false promises about how the Ministry would catch whoever was at fault; and leave, never to be seen again.

The only change to their routine was the individual who waltzed through the front door. New recruits, he suspected. Or whatever idiot had been stupid enough to piss off the Dispatch Witch. It was rather intriguing that they'd sent Granger.

Still, her arrival boded no better for the cessation of the threats against him. On the very rare occasions when he'd left his home for Ministry functions, she'd always treated him with, well, the antipathy one might reserve for someone who had joined a group seeking the extermination of wizards and witches of Muggle descent. Today's Auror visit would probably be the same, boring, choreographed investigation it always was. Sometimes he wondered why he even called the Aurors. Her disdain would be no different from the others, delivered with glee and no doubt a side order of Gryffindor righteousness.

Several moments later, he was still looking out the window when he began to wonder what was taking Tilly so long. He turned his head towards the door and was surprised to see Granger hovering inside the doorway, taking in the details of his study. The customary sneer was absent. Instead, her face was schooled into stony determination.

'Mr. Malfoy,' she said coldly as she noticed him looking in her direction. She offered no further greeting or pleasantries, but didn't seem inclined to deliver the typical oafish disregard shown by her colleagues. 'Could you direct me to the mysterious packages that you've been receiving?'

He sighed and arose from his seat by the window. He gestured to the sideboard behind his large, walnut desk. 'The same owl has delivered them all, a Common Barn Owl, though its plumage is darker grey than one usually sees. I've attempted tracer spells on the owl, but it seems to be protected against such charms.'

Granger walked stiffly, but resolutely, around the desk as she approached the sideboard, never once turning her back to him. Her posture radiated discomfort. She approached the sideboard and made a cursory examination of the small stack of parcels that had plagued his study for weeks. Her shoulders slumped. 'These are the items in question?' she demanded, gesturing to the six brown boxes, all identically marked and roughly the same size.

Lucius nodded solemnly.

The witch's hands rose to her hips, and she looked at him accusingly. 'You're joking, right? The boys at the office thought it would be funny to send me out on another prank mission, did they?'

'Auror Granger, I assure you, this is no joke.'

'Fine. I'll play along. Mr. Malfoy, why is it you think these packages are suspicious?'

'Auror Granger, it is a little known fact, but my first mission for the Dark Lord back before he had fully revealed the extent of his plans, of course was to secure an alliance and breeding arrangement with the Amazons. There are very few witches and wizards alive today who know of my involvement, and by all accounts the mission with the Amazons ended on amicable terms, though the alliance was not secured. I don't know why someone would be taunting me about that mission, but I'm certain that anyone with a knowledge of it can not mean well.'

'Mr. Malfoy, I can say with near certainty that these packages have nothing to do with that mission.'

'I hardly understand how you could have come to a conclusion so quickly. You've not cast any spells upon the packages. You've scarcely looked at them!' Lucius's anger threatened to boil over.

'Mr. Malfoy. These boxes are not from the Amazons. They are not from anyone who may have known about your mission. They are from a Muggle company that originally sold books and now sells damn near anything imaginable. These are *not* suspicious packages. They are pieces of post. Someone has sent you a present!'

'A Muggle company.'

'That's right, Mr. Malfoy. See, you can see their web address though I don't suppose you know what the internet is, do you? It's right here on the side of the box "Amazon.co.uk". You enter that into a Muggle computer, and it takes you to a virtual shop front.'

His teeth ground together. 'Auror Granger, regardless of their Muggle origin, I still contend these packages are suspicious. Who amongst my acquaintance would send me Muggle packages?'

'Well, I suppose you do have a point there.' Her resigned sigh ruffled the stack of parchments on the left end of the sideboard.

'Yes, Miss Granger, how tedious for you to actually have to perform your job.'

She scowled at him.

'Mr. Malfoy, normally we call in a specialist to transport a suspected Dark Object back to the Ministry where it can safely be examined *as we see fit*. However, there's a departmental meeting this afternoon that I confess I'd rather avoid. Therefore, you'll have the pleasure of watching me perform my job. Do have a seat. These things tend to take a while. Now, normally I would ask you to indicate the order in which you received the packages. However, in this case, I think I can clearly suss that out for myself using the postmarks in the corner here.'

Raising her wand, she levitated the most recent box and directed it onto the floor. Hex-revealing spells. Jinx-revealing spells. Basic potions detectors. Dark Magic detecting spells. Portkey detecting spells. Dozens upon dozens of spells revealed nothing.

At first, it was nearly entrancing to watch her. Her arm arched over and over casting the dizzying array of spells. Thirty-three minutes later, he began to wonder when she would finish her damned choreographed routine. Forty minutes after she started, she declared the box entirely innocuous. She began repeating the process on the second box. Lucius began counting.

Honestly, there were much better ways he could spend his time. Yet, he was loath to leave her alone in the study, and he knew he still wouldn't be able to concentrate on his business accounts. So he sat. And counted. And was astonished to see that she cast seventy-three spells on each box.

She asked for water after the second box and paused for several moments before beginning the third. No conversation passed between them. She massaged and stretched her shoulders in silence.

Lucius found his impatience mounting with each box. The fourth had him squirming in his seat. By the fifth, he was pacing by the bookcases. So much for the girl's reputation as a know-it-all. It was simply impossible that no hexes, no curses, no poisons were found inside or on the surface of any box. The entire situation made the hair on his neck bristle.

She was on the fifteenth spell on the last box when his patience snapped. 'Auror Granger, your spells are revealing nothing, but I am certain there is something suspicious

in these packages. I'm tired of waiting. Whatever awaits me, I'll deal with it myself.'

He made to grab one of the parcels the girl had checked before she could argue. 'No!' she shouted and clutched the parcel seconds before he touched it.

The edges of the room swirled as he felt a familiar pull at his navel.

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Chapter 2 of 10

Lucius and Hermione slowly discover the parameters of their captivity.

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They landed in an empty room, four white walls surrounding them with a door in the centre of one wall and a small window at the top of the opposite wall. Stumbling briefly to retain their footing, they each still clutched the Amazon package.

Hermione glared at Lucius. 'You. Should. Have. Waited.' She dropped her hands, leaving him holding the box. 'Oh, no! My wand! I had it in my hand when I grabbed the box. Do you have yours?'

Lucius reached for the holster hidden in a seam on his right trouser leg. 'My wand is also missing,' he admitted, swallowing the bile that arose with the realisation that they'd been disarmed.

'Bugger. I wanted to test the door for hexes before I try to open it,' she muttered. She approached the door and tentatively reached her hand out, hovering a centimetre away from the door knob. Her head tilted to the side for a moment before she clutched the handle. There were no nasty side effects, but unsurprisingly, the knob refused to turn.

She began pacing the length of the wall opposite the door. Minutes later, she switched to an adjacent wall.

Lucius watched the bizarre witch curiously. He counted her steps, roughly estimating the room's dimensions. Bloody fantastic. He was stuck in a three metre by three metre room with a witch who just barely tolerated him with civility. Hell, he had larger cupboards than this room.

Suddenly, she stopped pacing. 'Fuck me,' she mumbled under her breath.

'What did you say, Auror Granger?' Surely she wasn't...He shuttered that line of thought before he needed to Oblivate himself.

Granger seemed to miss his affronted look. 'I worked out how the Portkey evaded my detection spells.'

Lucius blinked. This was entirely unexpected. In his experience with Narcissa, long-suffering silences were always followed by angry outbursts and threats against his manhood. 'What?'

'Well, at first, I suspected I missed it because I was testing the contents of the box rather than the box itself. However, the thirty-first and fifty-seventh spells should have caught any Portkey charms on the box itself. Then, I thought it rather curious that the Portkey didn't activate until *you* touched it,' she continued yammering.

It was rather mind-boggling that the witch could recall the precise order and number of spells she had cast. Though, he admittedly had rather minimal knowledge of Auror protocol and training. Perhaps this was standard. He thought back to the mindless brutes who had invaded his home both before and after the war. Perhaps not.

'At that point the solution is rather obvious, don't you think?'

Oh, bugger. He'd stopped paying attention to the witch entirely. He tried to formulate a response yet needn't have bothered.

Granger rambled on, 'Well, of course, you see the solution. But it's rather curious that someone would go to the trouble of keying a Portkey to you specifically, don't you think?'

Lucius nodded, thinking that surely this could not be a good sign at all. A Muggle package, sent to him via owl, set to Portkey him specifically to wherever this was. As much as he loathed admitting it, it was fortunate that one of the many banes of his son's youth was stuck with him. Anyone from the so-called good side during the war was likely to regard her as a heroine. She could be a reasonable bargaining chip. Hell, if he played his cards right, given her Gryffindor tendencies, she'd probably volunteer for the role. And if their abductor was a former associate, at the very least he could use her as a human shield whilst he was running away.

They lapsed into silence. Presumably, she was pondering the particulars of their situation...silently, thank Merlin. Draco had whinged about the know-it-all, chatterbox, Mu ... Muggle-born witch every single summer or holiday he'd been home from Hogwarts. Every time he'd seen her at a damned Ministry function, she'd been blabbering on about something or other.

Perhaps he should make an effort to cultivate the witch's good graces. Aside from making their time in captivity more tolerable, she might be more inclined to intercede on his behalf when the next round of death threats arose. Failing that, if he ever summoned the energy and inclination to re-enter wizarding society, she would be a powerful acquaintance.

He watched her continuing to pace the room, rubbing her arms as she went. 'Are you cold? Would you like my jacket?'

She looked at him as if he'd turned orange and begun clucking. 'Erm, yes and thank you.'

He shrugged the jacket off from underneath his robes and handed it to her when she next passed the spot where he'd propped himself. She promptly rolled up the sleeves, probably wrinkling them beyond the hope of house-elf charms. Fortunately, she was pacing in the other direction and missed seeing him cringe at her abuse of his clothing.

Granger continued to pace. At first, her pacing was informative. He'd already determined the room's dimensions, and her steps were measured enough that he could tell the time as well. He counted the seconds and found that each circuit of the room took a minute and a half. He sighed. They'd been stuck here forty-five minutes since he'd made that determination. And given the hour she'd arrived at the manor, and the time it had taken to examine each box, it was likely to be well past five o'clock.

He stood by the declaration that had landed them here; whoever was threatening him, he wished they'd just get on with it. The bloody waiting was driving him to distraction. On Granger's fifty-second trip around the room, Lucius could tolerate it no more. 'For the love of Nimue, stop pacing!' So much for trying to curry her favour.

She scowled in his direction but sank to the floor. Moments later, her foot began jiggling.

'Are you always so fidgety, Auror Granger?'

She blushed. 'Sorry, I really need to use the loo. I was pacing to avoid thinking about it.'

At her words, the back right corner of the room shifted, and a small door appeared. Before he could so much as blink, Granger had crossed the room and pressed her back against the wall next to the door. She waited for the door to open. When, after several moments, it had not, she slowly reached for the handle, twisted it, and kicked the door open.

No one emerged, and eventually Granger inched towards the door and cast a quick glance inside. 'Oh, thank Merlin!' she cried before rushing into the little room and slamming the door behind her.

A couple of moments later, she exited the room, visibly relieved. Lucius rolled his eyes.

He waited a good ten minutes before availing himself of the facilities. When he returned to Granger's company, she was seated at a small writing desk, scribbling furiously on several different-coloured pieces of parchment. Lucius craned his neck from several paces away from the desk. 'Are you sure it's wise to be writing case notes on something this room has given you?'

Granger whipped around in her chair, startled. 'I'm not so dim-witted as that, Mr Malfoy. The runes written at the top of the page will prevent anyone but you or me from reading what I've noted here.'

Lucius's eyes narrowed. 'A series of runes will do that?' he said flatly, refusing to let his voice betray any hint of curiosity, or that he might be the slightest bit impressed.

Granger nodded and tore off a scrap of parchment. She began scrawling her runes at the top, and then he could no longer read the slashings of her quill. She lifted her quill and looked at him, smirking at his blank expression. He was quite certain he was better off not knowing what the cheeky witch had written.

For several moments, she continued taking notes on the parchments he could read. He scanned the tops of the pages. Theories. Facts. Suspects. Questions. Tasks. The witch was incredibly organised. He reached for the page of suspects only to have his hand slapped...slapped!...by the witch.

'I deserve to know who has put my life at risk, Auror Granger,' he retorted, rubbing his hand.

'And I'll let you know my conclusions once I've obtained significant credible evidence,' she replied, turning to face him. 'If I tell you now, it will only taint your answers to my questions.'

While her company was likely to be insufferable, perhaps being trapped here with Granger would be worth the agony; finally, he had Auror resources committed to his case. Decent Auror resources from the look of things. Perhaps if he could win her over, then he could regain a bit of influence in the department.

His machinations were interrupted before they could begin, as Granger pondered out loud, 'I wonder if the room will feed us.'

Nothing happened.

'I'm hungry,' she stated.

In the centre of the room, a small table set for two suddenly appeared. Moments later a serving plate materialised, piled with sandwiches and crisps. Lucius strolled to the table and seated himself, sniffing at the simple fare. Ham and cheese. This was *not* dinner. Merlin, it didn't even pass as a decent lunch. Granger stood up from her desk and joined him. She picked through the sandwiches and complained to whomever or whatever was listening to their conversation, 'Is it possible to get a sandwich without meat?'

A minute later, two sandwiches appeared on her plate. Granger lifted up the corner of each and sneered. 'A chip butty and a crisp sandwich? That's hardly nutritious. Could I have a mozzarella and pesto sandwich instead?'

Her plate emptied.

'What was in that?' Lucius asked with disgust.

Granger grimaced. 'White bread, butter, and steak and pepper crisps. I may have lost my appetite entirely. Steak....' She shuddered.

Lucius silently gave thanks for his decidedly simple fare. At least it was edible. He took another bite of his ham and cheese.

Several minutes passed and nothing appeared on Granger's plate.

'Erm, perhaps just a cheese sandwich?'

Two pieces of white bread with a slab of Cheddar in between appeared on her plate. She reluctantly picked up the sandwich and took the smallest bite possible. She scowled at the ceiling, as if the sandwiches had descended directly from the floor above. 'This is passable, I suppose.'

They ate in silence until parchment and quill appeared next to the serving platter. 'Oh, what's this?' Granger picked up the parchment. 'It seems to be asking what we want for breakfast, lunch, and dinner tomorrow. I wonder...!' She scribbled something onto the parchment. The words didn't fade. 'Excellent! I'll be having curried aubergine and ginger-poached pears for lunch.' The witch looked ridiculously proud of herself as she completed the rest of the left side of the parchment. She handed the parchment to him and returned to her pitiful sandwich, which was seemingly more palatable than before as she began eating earnestly.

Lucius filled out the parchment and sat back in his chair, placing his napkin on his plate. 'This room rather reminds me of a room at Hogwarts. The Room of Requirement, we called it.' Lucius smiled ever-so-slightly as he reminisced. 'I wonder if the room is still there.'

Granger stared at him, her mouth open and full of sandwich. 'You must be kidding. No, you're not. Of course the Room of Requirement is still there! Your son used it to smuggle Death Eaters into the castle the night that Dumbledore was killed!'

Lucius wondered how he'd forgotten *that* detail. 'Draco and I did not have much opportunity to play catch up over such details while the Dark Lord occupied our home.'

Her jaw clenched. 'And was it beyond you to pay attention to the details of his trial? Or were you so preoccupied with saving your own skin that you couldn't be bothered?'

He stood from his chair and leaned across the table, his teeth gritted, and eyes narrowed. 'My son means more to me than my own life. *Do not* make presumptions about my family, Granger.'

Granger took several deep breaths. 'What time is it?' she barked at the room. A clock appeared on her desk. She sighed. 'Nine o'clock. Look, Mr Malfoy, it's been a long and stressful day. I've still got notes to write, but I could write them any time. Do you want first or second watch?'

Lucius stared at her coldly. 'So long as I can have a hot shower,' he over-articulated to the room, 'I would prefer second watch.' He paused when he heard the sound of running water emanating from the bathroom. 'How many hours of sleep will you grant me, Auror Granger?' he asked, sneering.

'If I can get a cup of coffee,' she announced, 'then I should be able to stay alert until about three o'clock.'

'I suppose that will have to suffice,' he replied before stalking off to the shower.

A/N: Beta of dreams, dreamydragon, has noted that the kidnap by Portkey plot device was used in the most recent round of the SS/HG exchange. I've not read the story in question. I've lifted the kidnap by Portkey plot device from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* all on my own. :)

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Chapter 3 of 10

Breakfast and lunch with a side of interviewing.

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Hermione cracked one eye open and surveyed her surroundings. *Nimue's knickers, it wasn't a nightmare.* She barely suppressed a groan as she thought over the events of the previous day.

She cursed the brashness typical of her Hogwarts house. Harry rushed into situations with no regard for personal safety. Ron handled emotional situations with all the grace of a gazelle with four left feet. Her own Gryffindoriness seemed to have manifested itself in blundering into situations, opening her mouth when she ought not to, revealing rather more information than appropriate, and now, apparently, cursing under duress.

She'd ignored Malfoy's look of shock, but had certainly seen it. She sniggered to herself. He'd been utterly appalled at the notion of her propositioning him for sex the moment she'd been trapped in a room with him. She'd probably only reinforced Malfoy's opinion of Muggle-borns as crass, uncouth creatures unfit to walk outside in the daylight.

Not that she wasn't crass and uncultured on occasion. One did not work in the Auror department without, at the very least, developing a healthy respect for anyone who could belch the words to seventeen naughty limericks and flip Butterbeer caps into glasses ten metres away. It was either that or lose one's sanity. Also, she rather liked to think she'd learned not to get her knickers in a twist over every little social impropriety.

Really, if she were honest, a half-day of cohabitation with Lucius Malfoy hadn't been nearly as onerous as she would have thought. She'd half-expected near-constant whingeing and protests about sharing the same loo. That was certainly what the younger Malfoy would have done. Thank Merlin, father and son were cut from different, though undoubtedly expensive, cloth.

Hermione wondered how long she could just lie in bed, pondering the intricacies of their situation before she had to face Malfoy. Surely, there were theories to consider, lists of suspects to contemplate. Of course, once her brain was fully engaged and functioning, she'd naturally want her notes. She tried not to sigh. It seemed getting up was the only option. She rolled over and was just sitting up when she noticed Malfoy sitting at her desk.

'What are you doing at my desk?' she blurted before she could censor herself.

'Your desk, Auror Granger?'

'Well, my notes are there. You're not looking through them, are you?' She craned her neck.

'You're rather quick to condemn me, Auror Granger,' Malfoy replied, turning to face her and making a show of the book he was reading.

'Oh. Yes, perhaps I was too hasty.' She diverted her eyes and glanced around the room. 'Have you had breakfast yet?' Hermione's stomach rumbled loudly; the cheese sandwich the night before had satisfied her hunger as well as a slab of oily cheese between two pieces of white bread could. The empty pit of her stomach threatened to swallow the rest of her. She rose from the bed and stretched.

'I have had coffee, but no breakfast,' Lucius replied, raising a mug.

Hermione glanced at the still-empty table. The room did not pick up on subtlety, it seemed. 'I'm hungry,' she stated flatly.

The plate on Hermione's side of the table instantly filled with her usual fare: a slice of whole wheat toast, blackcurrant jam, a banana, and some melon, along with tea. She sat down and added a dash of milk with one sugar before tucking in. Riveted to her own food, it was several moments before she looked across the table at Lucius.

He was entirely surrounded by an army of serving platters, carafes, and little dishes of sauce. She watched as he drizzled Hollandaise sauce over a poached egg. He spread crème fraîche onto a perfectly toasted slice of berry-filled bread. He ate slowly, savouring each morsel. Hermione thought she heard a sigh of contentment as he swallowed a bite of sausage.

His gaze left his plate and flickered to hers. 'Is there a problem with your food, Miss Granger? You've hardly eaten a bite.'

'Oh, I'm just trying to determine the country of origin of various portions of your breakfast.'

'And would you like me to enlighten you?' he asked, eyeing her meagre breakfast with a smirk.

'Yes, humour me please,' she said, spreading the blackcurrant jam on her toast.

'The raspberry and violet jam is from Iffendic. The honey is spring honey from Corsica. The pâtisseries come from a little bakery in wizarding Paris. The sausage hails from the Cévennes.' Lucius continued for several moments.

Hermione shook her head, chuckling. 'You're the only person I know who can eat a Full English without taking a single bite of food from England.'

Lucius's laugh was barely audible before he took a bite of his egg, smearing the sauce and yolk with a triangle of wheat bread.

Hermione shook her head. 'And you require all this for breakfast?'

'Why, Miss Granger, it is the most important meal of the day.'

She hadn't thought it possible to smirk while eating, but Lucius seem to manage it with little effort.

Trust Lucius Malfoy to require a breakfast that probably cost more Galleons than her breakfast, lunch, and dinner combined. She ate the last of her meal and set the cutlery on her plate.

'Mr Malfoy, I was thinking that we may have got off to a bad start yesterday.'

Malfoy inclined his head as he finished chewing. 'Perhaps you are right, Miss Granger. If we are going to be stuck here for any length of time, I suppose it would be wise to put aside our differences.'

'Excellent, Mr Malfoy. Just a moment.' She scurried to her desk, asked the room for a chair, and grabbed the sheaf of parchment she'd organised the night before. She beckoned for him to join her. 'I was actually hoping to spend a good portion of the morning asking you some questions about assorted individuals from your past, so I can determine who has imprisoned us.'

'Certainly, Auror Granger. I would expect to be peppered with questions about my former associates.'

Hermione looked up to glare at him, but was shocked to see what appeared to be a genuine smile...well, to be accurate a slight quirk of his lip...that lit up his eyes. Lucius Malfoy? Teasing her with affection? What was in that coffee?

'Right,' she said as she shuffled her notes, pulling out the parchment for suspects. 'Well, it's very important that you keep your mind open as I ask these questions. Clues sometimes come from the oddest places, and I prefer to have a questioning style which encourages free association.' *Oh, Merlin, I sound like a swot, don't I?*

Lucius's posture had shifted from his relaxed breakfast laze to ramrod straight.

'Mr Malfoy, I have no ulterior motive in revisiting your past. I simply wish to find out who is keeping us here.'

Really, she hadn't any need to dig into Lucius's past. One week during last year's summer hols, when even criminals were on holiday, but Junior Aurors were practically chained to their desks, she'd been bored out of her skull and had read through most of the trial testimonies of assorted Death Eaters, ex-Death Eaters, and suspected sympathisers. She had paid close attention to all of the Malfoys' trials and couldn't help but be genuinely sympathetic to their case. Despite her cranky accusations the day before, she fully recognised Lucius's devotion to his family. Perhaps, that would be a good point to begin their conversation.

'Okay, well let's start with topics that should be fairly easy to discuss. How would you describe your relationship with your wife?'

'Auror Granger, I highly doubt Narcissa is behind this.'

'I understand, Mr Malfoy, but first of all, I need to consider all suspects, and secondly, our discussion may lead us to helpful information even if someone isn't a suspect.'

Lucius shifted uncomfortably in his seat. 'This is a highly personal topic, and I would rather not divulge this information....'

Hermione tried to quell her mounting frustration, 'Mr Malfoy, interviews of this nature are hardly ever pleasant, but if you protest every question that will only extend the duration and agony of my questioning.'

Malfoy heaved a long-suffering sigh and glared at her as he contemplated his response.

Merlin, does every man need to be treated like a five-year-old? Hermione wondered as she assessed his body language. Today would truly be agonizing if she couldn't get the man to relax and answer her questions.

'Narcissa has filed for divorce,' Malfoy ground out. 'Our solicitors are resolving some of the final details. I expect a signed decree any day.'

Hermione looked up, brows raised and her mouth forming a silent "Oh". Not that she really followed the *Prophet*, but Hermione couldn't help wondering how Malfoy had kept this quiet. As much as members of her department enjoyed harassing both elder and younger Malfoy, surely her gossip-mongering co-workers would have mentioned this.

'You're wondering why you've not heard of this? Our solicitors are bound to our confidence, and both Narcissa and I are able to keep our affairs discreet.'

Hermione was scribbling a note to follow up on their solicitors when Malfoy's last words arrested her. 'Affairs?'

'Narcissa and I have long had a rather open arrangement. However, it seems she's found someone she deems a more suitable long-term partner.'

She bit her tongue to avoid asking the obvious question...best to let Malfoy make his admissions at his own pace. She watched him fidget in his seat.

'Do I really have to tell you who?' Malfoy asked petulantly. At last, he continued, 'Heathcote Barbary.'

Hermione quickly flipped through her mental Rolodex and came up empty. 'Should I know who that is?'

'You must not read the *Daily Prophet* or *Witch Weekly*, Auror Granger.'

'Please, just stop calling me that. The title rather chafes these days.'

There, that should pique his curiosity. Besides, Hermione thought as she recalled Shackbolt's Semi-annual Seminar on Studying Subjects and Suspects, *it's usually beneficial to develop a rapport with the victim of the crime. Not having the term 'Auror' introduced every five minutes should relax things a bit.*

Malfoy sighed impatiently. 'Miss Granger, are you honestly telling me you don't know who Heathcote Barbary is?'

'Erm, yes.'

'He's a guitarist for the Weird Sisters.'

No wonder Lucius looked like he'd swallowed a case of sherbet lemons. Bested by someone younger, thinner, and with thicker hair. 'Oh. Well, I suppose that's better than Stubby Boardman.'

Malfoy's glare could have cut through six hundred metres of ministerial red tape. 'Would you like me to continue? If not, I'm sure the room will provide me with additional reading material.'

'I apologise, Mr Malfoy. I didn't mean to make light of your situation. How did Narcissa make Mr Barbary's acquaintance?'

'Our experience with,' Malfoy paused as his gaze flickered across her face, 'the Dark Lord left Narcissa on edge and eager to escape the Manor. His presence tainted nearly every room. In addition, seeing her sister's gradual mental decay left her rather paranoid about her own mental health. She spent the majority of the two years following the Dark Lord's defeat in the French Riviera. She met Mr Barbary while the group was in the area working on material for their next album.' At the word album, Lucius sneered as if producing a wizarding rock album was roughly on a par with cleaning her Kneazle's litter tray *sans* magic.

'I see. Why didn't you accompany her to the Riviera?'

'Initially, I needed to stay to restore many of our business accounts and contacts, which had deteriorated while our home was occupied. I oversaw the renovation of the Manor so that when Narcissa returned the traces of its occupation would be diminished. After several months, she wrote asking me not to join her.'

As Malfoy continued talking, Hermione began to wonder if this was the first time he had discussed the situation with anyone. As reluctant as the man was to begin talking about it, she now could scarcely get a word in edgewise. He didn't exactly seem broken up about it, but the entire situation was turning rather bizarre. Most disconcerting was the fact that he was not behaving to type. This was no Slytherin playing his cards close to his chest. No, Lucius Malfoy was sharing more information than Hagrid under the influence of Veritaserum.

Lucius spoke quite freely about the end of his marriage: the nature of Narcissa's communications (cordial, and disgustingly in love); what details were being argued by the solicitors (surprisingly not Galleons, just visitation schedules for future grandchildren and a particular villa in the Italian countryside); and, at great length, how he felt about the entire ordeal (quite miffed since Narcissa had been a cold fish for the last eight or so years). The man wasn't foolish enough to maintain that theirs had been anything other than a marriage engineered for political gain, which had perhaps outlived its usefulness. Still, he was clearly not pleased about the public scrutiny that was certain to erupt once *Witch Weekly* sighted Narcissa on Heathcote's arm.

Eventually, the conversation shifted from Narcissa to Draco. It became rather apparent in short order that the son was no more likely to be culpable than the soon-to-be-ex-wife.

Hermione resisted every urge to move the conversation along from her obnoxious, former classmate. While *The Daily Galleon* may have found it fascinating that Draco had taken over the day-to-day operations of Lucius's foreign estates, she certainly had no desire to be brought up to date on the latest aspects of Draco's life. She sighed. It was altogether likely that they'd been kidnapped by someone Draco had double-crossed. And with Lucius increasingly distancing himself from the family business, he would have little, if any, information on their captor.

She stifled a yawn and glanced at the clock. The entire morning's conversation wasn't exactly on target with how she wanted to conduct the interview, but there was little time left until lunch, and she was unlikely to wring any other details out of Lucius before then.

Better to encourage his uncharacteristic openness. If he was still cooperating, she hoped to broach more challenging topics after their meal. Besides, not that she would ever admit it out loud, it was quite pleasing to watch the way Lucius's countenance softened when he spoke so warmly about his family, even despite Narcissa's defection.

She was watching that face attentively when she suddenly realised he had ceased speaking and was staring at her. Quickly looking down, she scribbled something on her parchment in the hope it would appear she'd been pondering something of great import.

'I'm sorry, Lucius, I was considering something you'd said earlier about Draco's business dealings. Perhaps now would be a good time to break for lunch.'

Lucius's mouth twitched infinitesimally. 'Yes, I believe I've said that already and have taken the liberty of calling for our meal.'

'Oh. Er, thanks.'

She tried not to salivate or dance with joy at the sight of the table. Her sandwich! Goat cheese with roasted aubergines and courgettes! A pile of crisps! Perhaps yesterday's ravenous hunger would abate after another meal or two.

Walking, not scampering, to the table, she wondered at the country of origin of Lucius's midday meal. It seemed to be a simple bowl of stew and a hunk of bread, but she knew it could not be so simple. Lucius must have seen her eyeing it. 'Have you ever had Waterzooi, Hermione?'

'I have not. What is in Waterzooi? Where is it from?'

'It's a chicken stew from Ghent.'

Hermione smiled as she swallowed her first bite of ginger-poached pear. 'And let me guess, you had the ingredients imported from Belgium. Are you determined to eat a different country's cuisine at every meal?'

Lucius chuckled as he broke off a chunk of bread. 'Merely taking advantage of our accommodations. Our captors have inconvenienced both of us, so they may as well be troubled for our keep.'

Hermione laughed and shook her head. Perhaps, assuming he could keep meat off the menu, she should consider letting Lucius write her order for tomorrow.

4

Chapter 4 of 10

Decompressing and dinner.

chapter.

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The Snake's Head Frittillary

Chapter 4

Hermione stared at the bed, her eyes glazed over. The afternoon's conversation had overcompensated for her lack of notes from the morning. Her brain had not felt so fuzzy since her N.E.W.T.s.

Her empty gaze drifted over to the bathroom door. Lucius had opted for showering prior to dinner. Not a bad idea. A deluge of water to cleanse away the deluge of information. She rubbed the heels of her hands against her eyes and stood from the desk, taking advantage of Lucius's absence to pace the room.

Following their lunch, she had asked Lucius if there were any Death Eaters who might seek revenge because the Malfoys had recanted their beliefs under Veritaserum during their trial and then escaped further prosecution. Lucius had requested parchment and immediately jotted down an exhaustive list of all major and minor Death Eaters. Once Lucius had crafted the initial list, it had taken them the better part of three hours to pick through it in detail.

She had been neither astounded nor impressed by Lucius's encyclopaedic knowledge. His cunning was legendary, after all, and one could hardly be cunning without having a thorough understanding of one's compatriots and adversaries. She did allow herself the slightest bit of admiration for the speed with which he recalled and volunteered the information, some of which was both personal and painful.

There had been surprises here and there during the interview. An official from the Ministry who'd somehow evaded trial and been promoted several times in recent years. The woman who had disappeared shortly before the Battle of Hogwarts only to resurface two years later teaching at Durmstrang. The sheer number of individuals still unaccounted for.

But, perhaps the biggest shocks had come after they'd hashed through the list of minor individuals and stopped for tea. Whereas they'd skipped over deceased minor Death Eaters unless they had kin likely to pursue revenge on Lucius, they covered all of the major Death Eaters in great detail. Though there had been unexpected humour in his account...the humour one could only find years after such evil was cold in the ground...his commentary had naturally been chilling. She still shivered at Lucius's descriptions of Dolohov and McNair.

But it had been Lucius's accounts of Bellatrix Lestrange and Severus Snape, which had been the most unsettling, though for quite different reasons. She'd never really considered the impact Bellatrix would have had on her in-laws. Oh, sure, the Grangers had a "crazy" uncle that she joked with her parents about...one had to be quite particular about seating arrangements at Christmas...but having Bellatrix around constantly, blaming Lucius and his incarceration for all her recent misfortunes, had threatened to tear the family to shreds. Lucius had shared countless anecdotes of her madness; it was no wonder Narcissa feared for her own mind. Hermione tried not to remember what Lucius had recounted or the flood of her own memories that had come rushing back. She would review the notes if need be. If it weren't absurdly dangerous, she might consider asking the room to deliver some Dreamless Sleep. With luck, the nightmares wouldn't come until they'd made their escape.

The sound of the shower stopped, and she quit her circuit of the room to resume her spot at her desk. She deliberately shifted her thoughts to the afternoon's other surprise. The affection with which Lucius had spoken of Severus Snape warmed her. She regretted not having known the man as a colleague rather than a teacher. Lucius had clearly considered the man one of his few friends. He'd harboured doubts about the man's loyalties but had kept them a well-guarded secret and had been as shocked as the rest of the world when Severus had killed Dumbledore.

Lucius had clearly mourned the loss of his friend deeply, most particularly since it had been Lucius who had passed along Voldemort's summons to the Shrieking Shack.. He'd also never had the opportunity to speak to Snape privately to thank him for interceding on Draco's behalf, albeit against his will. She wondered if Lucius had any friends to fill the gap left by both Snape and Narcissa. It was worrisome that he would be returning to the solitude of the manor when this ordeal ended. She snorted to herself. Their imprisonment had likely been the most social contact Lucius had had in months. And with her. Lucky Lucius.

She was straightening her parchments when Lucius emerged from the bathroom, plaiting his hair.

'I am absolutely famished,' he declared and smiled when the table filled with food once again.

Hermione seated herself at the table, her brow furrowed.

'Is something troubling you, Hermione?' Lucius asked as he uncorked a bottle of wine.

He offered her a glass, but she shook her head, opting instead for spiced pumpkin juice. Her tongue was notoriously loose when plied with wine, and she couldn't take such a risk, given that their abductors...or Lucius, for that matter...could take advantage.

She surveyed the meal in front of her, trying to decide how to phrase her concern. 'It's a bit alarming that you've settled in so quickly. I would have expected you to be a bit more suspicious of our situation.'

Lucius seemed disturbed at considering this. With his forehead creased in worry, he sliced a spear of asparagus and dredged it through the cream sauce. 'Something about this place seems familiar to me. I'm quite certain I've not been here before. I wouldn't go so far as to say that this room is welcoming me, but it certainly seems to have tolerated my demands well.'

Her frown increased. 'It seems unlikely that anyone meaning you harm would treat you so well.' She nibbled at her aubergine parmigiana. 'Although, it's entirely possible they're trying to lull us into a false sense of security. Or perhaps treating you well so you'll be more apt to meet their demands.'

Her sigh of frustration nearly extinguished the candles lighting the table. She glared at them. Fortunately, the other sources of illumination, the candle on her desk and the wall sconces they'd requested, remained lit. Otherwise, she might have thought the room was trying to set the mood. She glanced at their two beds to make sure they'd not been Transfigured into one. 'I just wish I had at least an inkling of an idea who has captured us. Then I could understand their intentions.'

Lucius tipped his glass in her direction. 'I'm sure things will be clearer after you've had some time to think through our discussion today.'

They ate for several moments in silence. Hermione considered that if they were stuck here for long, and if the room continued to deliver food *this* good, she might need to ask the room for larger trousers.

Lucius interrupted her thoughts, 'Today has gone rather differently than I might have imagined.'

Hermione nearly snorted pumpkin juice at the understatement. She nodded to Lucius. 'I'll admit I had thought the same. I appreciate the ease with which you've shared some rather sensitive information. I'd expected you to be far more reticent.'

'And I'm quite surprised you listened so attentively. Based on my son's description of your personality,' Lucius smirked, 'I'd have expected an endless barrage of questions. You're far more delightful than his accounts intimated. Why, you've listened with fascination, even as I droned on about Narcissa. You've laughed at all my jokes. You should be careful, or you might make a man think you're interested in pursuing an acquaintance outside of captivity.'

Hermione spluttered before she caught the gleam in Lucius's eyes and realised his deliberate tease. She sidestepped his trap. 'And you should realise you're far more charming when you aren't *trying* to be.'

His meal finished, he placed his cutlery on his plate. 'Yes, but then how would I weed out the twits? Only the vapid ones twitter and flutter their lashes at my exaggerated flirtation.'

She blinked. 'Lucius, you hardly leave your house.'

'Ministry functions, my dear. There's always a gaggle of empty-headed beauties at Ministry functions. Sometimes I wonder if they special order them for the occasion.'

She chuckled as she sopped up the last of the sauce with her bread. She might have found his comment misogynistic, if it weren't true. She and Ginny usually managed a good whingeing or two about the brainless eye-candy that proliferated at Ministry events.

No sooner had she finished her meal than an enormous slice of hazelnut-chocolate torte appeared in front of her, complete with doily and a delicate dusting of powdered sugar. She stared at it, wondering how she would manage to eat even a quarter of the dessert.

Lucius's plate was empty, dessert apparently omitted from his menu. 'This portion is considerably larger than what I would normally eat. You're welcome to take half of it.'

'That is quite generous, and I'd be happy to share with you. Would you care for an after-dinner drink, Hermione? A glass of Sciaccheta would suit quite well with the hazelnut torte.'

Hermione blinked away visions of them feeding one another forkfuls of the divine looking dessert. The alcohol, yes, the alcohol. She should object to the alcohol. 'I hardly think it's appropriate to indulge in our current situation. Our captors could walk through that door at any moment!'

'Oh, come now. I doubt one little after-dinner drink will put us at a disadvantage. Besides, if they were angling to surprise us, they'd have popped in while you were asleep last night.' Lucius continued, 'Despite our amicable interview session earlier, I'm certain you're as tense as I am. Neither one of us will sleep tonight in our present state.' He paused a moment before needling her further. 'I'll take the first watch and allow you to sleep.'

She recognised the signs of a man who would persist until he'd won his way. Years spent in Ron's company had at least taught her that. And Lucius showed all the signs of having heels firmly planted in the ground. Sighing, Hermione agreed, and Lucius ordered the room to deliver a bottle of Sciaccheta. She batted away a flicker of disappointment when Lucius requested an additional plate and bisected the wedge of torte with a knife.

She took a bite of the torte and closed her eyes. Oh, this was good. Very, very good. She tried to recall if she'd ever had a dessert so sumptuous. A happy sigh escaped as she savoured it. The corners of her mouth turned up involuntarily. Forget finding a way out of this prison. With food like this, she never wanted to leave.

She opened her eyes to find Lucius entirely immobile, watching her as if his life depended on finding every freckle and mole. For a moment, she stilled, observing their surroundings and wondering if he'd been paralysed by their captors. Then she saw him blink and comprehension dawned. Lucius Malfoy was staring at her rather blankly. She swallowed the torte. This was... irregular, to say the least.

When her fork dipped to scoop up another bite of torte, Lucius seemed to shake off his daze and began eating. Conversation about the taste, texture, and quality of the dessert and accompanying wine passed between them before they slipped into a comfortable silence.

Full from dinner, plied with wine, and exhausted from the day's events, Hermione yawned as she set down her fork. 'You were right about the wine relaxing me. I think I could drop off to sleep right now!'

Lucius smiled. 'By all means, go ahead. I did promise you I would take the first watch.'

She dabbed her mouth with the napkin, trodded off to the bathroom to brush her teeth, crawled into bed, and immediately fell asleep without noticing that Lucius's gaze followed her every moment she was in his sight.

5

Chapter 5 of 10

Hermione cracks the case.

A/N: This was written for the first ever LM/HG exchange for Shiv5468. My undying thanks to betas of dreams DreamyDragon and Persevero for some extremely spectacular work under the duress of constant hunger from food porn. Kudos as well to BlueParis for advice on hand-to-hand combat. Prompts will be listed after the last chapter.

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Hermione twirled a quill between her fingers. The downside of yesterday's marathon interview session was that she'd exhausted all of her questions for Lucius and still had no formidable leads as to their abductor's identity. She supposed she could quiz Lucius on his relationships with Order members and assorted Ministry officials sometime after he awoke. Normally, one was lucky to have a victim who could withstand a two-hour interview in one sitting. That left an interviewer with ample time to analyse information and plan follow-up questions. Two four-hour sessions in one day were entirely unheard of.

Now she had a stack of parchments, five inches thick and crammed margin-to-margin with notes, and hardly knew where to begin to sort critical information from spurious detail. She sighed. Reading through them would be a good place to start, but that could well take hours. Not that she wasn't used to sifting through piles of notes while her co-workers tackled the excitement. But she felt a bit nauseous at the thought of shuffling papers when their kidnapper, or kidnappers, could burst in at any moment. Though, the way they'd been treated thus far, she half expected their captors to waltz in at dinnertime, offering to crack Lucius's lobster or butter their bread.

Ah, well, the notes wouldn't organise themselves. She began sorting them quietly, trying not to disturb the slumbering Lucius and willing herself not to turn and look at him. She'd already watched the candlelight flicker across his features much longer than she thought acceptable.

She returned to staring at the stack of parchments. Sometimes, this kind of analysis was exhilarating. A pattern jumped out and grabbed you immediately, glistening against the drab flotsam and jetsam. You ran with the pattern until you were out of breath, and it delivered all of the answers you needed. But more often, you slogged through drivel, word upon word of utter shit. Hoped against hope that there would be something...anything...that would make the boredom end. To make matters worse, usually the cases were mind-numbingly pedestrian. She supposed she should relish the brief spot of mystery that had been dumped into her lap.

At least Lucius's interview had been interesting and should prove entertaining enough in the retelling. With any luck, she'd find a credible lead sooner rather than later. She

yawned. The shock of Lucius shaking her awake and her morning shower had worn off entirely. She whispered to the room, requesting a cup of coffee. It delivered Lucius's blend, which was guaranteed to keep her awake well into the afternoon. She lined up her three quills and grabbed a fresh sheet of parchment from the seemingly endless stash in the cubbyhole on the right side of the desk. She rolled her shoulders and cracked her neck before grabbing the top page of notes.

As usual, once she picked up the top piece of parchment and began the task, Hermione lost herself in the reading. Three pages in, and any traces of boredom had withered. It was fascinating to read back through Lucius's accounts of his fellow Death Eaters. She'd read through Death Eater interviews before, but always when the individual was under suspicion for a crime.

Lucius had less to lose and more to gain by offering as unbiased an account as he could muster. She knew with certainty that he was no innocent, but his views and demeanour seemed night and day from his public persona during the war. Oh, he was likely playing to his audience, but the account was clearly well-reasoned and showed a depth of understanding that belied Lucius's pretty exterior. The man had a shrewd intellect that was clearly as sharp as the image he portrayed. His accounts had left her with an insight into several individuals who she'd always written off with the label of 'mentally unstable'.

By the time the sun had risen, she'd written a dozen follow-up questions and had outlined a strategy for compiling the information she'd collected from Lucius. And by the time Lucius awoke, she had narrowed down a list of likely suspects from the Ministry and the Order to include in the day's questioning. This was fortunate as the coffee nearly had her vibrating out of her chair.

'For the love of Merlin, stop that infernal tapping,' Lucius grouched as he sat up.

Confused, Hermione looked at her left hand. Her fingernails cantered against the desktop.

'Sorry,' she mumbled. 'Too much coffee on an empty stomach.'

Lucius grumbled and sauntered into the bathroom. Hermione tried to ignore his sleep-tousled hair and the line of flesh that had been revealed when he stretched. She called for breakfast.

Her fingers continued to click on the tabletop, and she was just beginning to wonder how long one man needed in the loo when Lucius finally approached the table, still grumbling about sleep deprivation and dreams filled with staccato rhythms. She restrained herself another fifteen seconds before grabbing the raspberry and violet jam, smearing it across her toast, and relishing the first bite. Along with her trouser size, her grocery bill would also take a hit. This breakfast was divine.

She was quite proud of her restraint, given her excitement over today's investigative plans.

Lucius had finished his meal and was folding his napkin before she laid out the morning schedule.

'I'd like to ask you some more questions, Lucius.'

'I'm all astonishment, Hermione.'

Hermione's enthusiasm dimmed. She rather missed their easy camaraderie from the day before.

'My apologies, Hermione. I did not sleep well last night, but that is no excuse for rudeness. Please, go ahead.'

'I'll try to make this brief,' she said, wincing. The session lasted three hours and twenty-three minutes.

At the end of her questioning, Lucius called for lunch and then levelled a weary gaze at her. 'Whatever it was I said yesterday about you not bludgering me with questions ... I take it back. Please tell me you're done.'

Hermione sighed, rubbing the back of her neck. 'I think so. Once I've manipulated this information and transferred it to the matrix I've devised, I think I should be able to determine your attacker's identity.'

'Matrix?' Lucius asked, slicing into the medallions of whatever meat graced his plate.

'Just a bit of Arithmancy,' she mumbled, stuffing a forkful of salad into her mouth.

Lucius laughed. 'I highly doubt it's just a bit of Arithmancy. Tell me, is it common for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to employ Arithmancy in their methods? I rather thought they usually went for brute force.'

Hermione snorted. 'Yes, brawn over brains. That's certainly their typical *modus operandi*.' The salad of crisp baby greens seemed to wilt before her eyes.

'And yet not, perhaps, your style.'

'They are resistant to change in all forms, including "high-brow number crunching". Why, there's never been a case solved at a desk. It's all footwork, crack investigations, and slamming back beers in dingy pubs in the hopes of catching a lead.'

Lucius looked sympathetic and offered her one of the steaming rolls he'd requested. The honey butter melted on contact.

Hermione ripped off a Knut-sized piece of roll and popped it into her mouth. 'And apparently, being the slightest bit bookish renders you entirely incapable of field service. Because, of course, I've *never* had to wield my wand in self-defence or, heaven forbid, cast an offensive hex.'

Lucius attempted to hide a smile behind his napkin.

'What?' she demanded.

She followed his eyes to the decimated pieces of roll scattered across her plate.

'Oh.'

'I thought Potter and Weasley were Aurors. Do the three of you not succeed in securing missions together?'

She laughed dryly. 'The boys use the situation to their advantage. They don't like for me to go on dangerous missions. When *to* get called into the field, it's usually just to investigate after the fact. This is the first spot of danger I've had in four years.'

'You almost sound as if you miss it,' Lucius observed.

'What I miss is being valued for my strengths and not having weaknesses assumed because of my personality or gender,' she replied, her voice as frosty as August in Antarctica.

'Hermione, I wasn't intending to tease you.' He sliced the remaining medallions of meat. 'So, if you're not out catching evil wizards, what do you usually do?'

Hermione pushed a piece of arugula around the lip of her plate. 'If I'm very lucky, I get to interview a victim. Usually, I'm parked at my desk reading field reports to weed out the important evidence collected by the brawny Aurors. I keep them from scratching their heads too hard.'

Bloody hell, she thought, it's become just like Hogwarts only, instead of doing just Ron and Harry's homework for them, I write papers for all their friends too. Also, the boys restrained themselves from farting "Merlin Save the Minister" in my presence.

Lucius seemed to notice that her salad had lost its appeal. 'Perhaps your appetite doesn't agree with what I ordered for you eighteen hours ago. Would you like my grilled vegetables?'

Thanking him, she made room on her plate and then tucked in with gusto. Lucius was right. The salad had ~~seemed~~ like a good idea the night before when Lucius had written it on the parchment, but it no longer suited her. Heavens, the man knew how to order food. The grilled potatoes, parsnips, and carrots with garlic and rosemary were better than anything she'd ever cobbled together in her own kitchen.

Fortified by her lunch and the information gleaned from the morning's session, Hermione settled in for an afternoon of data crunching. She worked steadily until three, rereading the notes from the morning and occasionally reaching for those from the day before. She distilled and condensed the evidence. She scribbled and scratched out. She mentally cheered and swore. She developed a knot in her back the size of a bludger.

Wondering why Lucius hadn't fussed about the rustling parchments, she turned around, ostensibly to pop her back, and glanced at him. Lucius reclined on his bed, sipping a cup of tea and reading a French novel in, of course, its native tongue. He treated their entrapment as if he were on extended holiday. She half expected him to strip off his socks and demand a pedicure at any moment. She rubbed the back of her neck. Maybe after this was all over, she'd spring for a weekend mini-break at that spa in Cheltenham that her aunt was always raving about.

She wasn't sure which was worse, being trapped in the stale, thankless environment at the Ministry or working tirelessly while the primary target wallowed in luxury. She chewed on the end of her quill. The food here *was* infinitely better than the Ministry canteen. And Lucius was markedly better company than her office mate Clarence, who considered it a crime against wizardkind to miss the Wednesday afternoon broadcast of *Quidditch Weekly* on the Wireless.

Facing the now towering stacks of parchment, Hermione's shoulders slumped. She was stuck. Flipping *back* through all the interviews had yielded nothing substantial, only a parchment-cut and a serious concern for anyone who named their child Evan...seven of them, scattered amongst major and minor Death Eaters. Twisting the quill between her fingers, she wondered if the coincidence might be explained by genealogy or whether the name itself was cursed. Thinking back to a brat with whom she'd attended Muggle Primary School, she briefly considered that it might be the latter.

She mentally ran through the list of rituals she normally indulged in to break her mental deadlock. Wandering down to the canteen and casting age-detecting spells on their notoriously foul sticky toffee pudding. Winding Clarence up by asking him about the Wasps versus Harpies match from 1952 and enquiring, for the fiftieth time, what the point was in continuing a match when all the Chasers were unconscious and the Snitch had been swallowed by a five-year-old in the crowd. Oh, Merlin, none of her usual tricks were going to be available. She felt trapped...well, of course she felt trapped they had, after all, been kidnapped. No pacing. No trips to Fortescue's. No nicking out early for a bit of alone time in her flat.

Hermione resisted the urge to bang her head on the desk and instead settled for the slightly less juvenile option of a strangled yelp of frustration. 'I'm at a complete stand still. I've no more questions to ask. My notes are perfectly organised. And I really, *really* thought my new method would help me figure it out.' She bit back a curse and glared at the parchments in front of her.

'Hermione?' Lucius asked tentatively.

'What?' she demanded, exasperation seething from every letter of her short retort.

Lucius pointed at the Amazon box that they'd stowed next to the desk. 'Perhaps we should open it.'

Hermione stared at the box. She'd considered kicking the damned thing under her bed just so she wouldn't have to look at the instrument of their abduction. She'd been too busy hating the box to consider looking inside.

'Fine,' she sighed. 'Open the bloody thing.'

Lucius asked the room for a knife and grumbled when it delivered a butter knife. Crouching on the ground, he slit the tape along the sides and top, then lifted the edges of the lid. 'Well that's odd,' he said, looking inside.

He made to remove an object from the box but flinched at Hermione's admonition.

'Don't touch it! I didn't get to cast all my spells on it.' She stood from her chair and looked over Lucius's shoulder, leaning on him for balance. *The Gardener's Guide to Growing Fritillaries?*

'Yes, whoever sent this is familiar with my greenhouses.'

'I wonder,' Hermione said before pushing against Lucius to stand up straight. She grabbed her quill and returned to her parchment, mumbling to herself as she wrote two columns of numbers down the right-hand side of the page. Shuffling through the papers, she searched frantically for...ah, there it was. She hurriedly added a row to the matrix.

She tossed the quill on the desk and ran her fingers across the row of numbers. She gasped. 'Oh my god. I think I've figured out who's keeping us here.'

A/N: Fritillaries are an endangered wild flower native to Britain. The Gardener's Guide to Growing Fritillaries is available for purchase at Amazon. Hopefully its author doesn't mind the plug. :)

6

Chapter 6 of 10

Lucius asks about Hermione's methods

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Lucius decided to humour her. He'd find out soon enough who it was. Better to let her think he wanted to hear her long-winded explanation. He could tell she was close to bursting with pride at her methodology, and he was probably going to hear it regardless. 'How?' he asked.

She blinked. 'How? Don't you mean who?'

'I assume you'll tell me who, but I must admit I'm a bit curious about how you divined the answer,' he said, trying not to sound as if he were buttering her up.

She shuffled her parchments together and motioned for him to pull the chair next to her. 'Well, I created a matrix of all the variables I thought pertinent to our abductor's identity.' She pointed out various columns. 'Whether or not they know you personally. How long they've known you. Which side, if any, they fought on during the war. The likelihood that they have knowledge of Muggle technology. The likelihood that their interests and abilities would lead them to select a text on endangered native flora. Is their magic advanced enough to produce a Portkey that activated when you touched it?'

Lucius interjected, 'You're able to identify our attacker just from that?'

'Well, there are other factors that I've included that are far less interesting.' She blushed before continuing, 'Anyway, then I used a combination of Arithmancy and Muggle statistics to predict their identity. I have a vector over here, see, that contains weight, either positive or negative, associated with each variable. I was a bit concerned that the function itself wouldn't be linear in nature. I would have had to consult some of my resources for anything more advanced. I'm not sure that this room could have provided them. Fortunately, a linear model does seem to work rather well. Anyway, each of the rows in this large matrix represents an individual. I can determine the likelihood that any one individual is our captor by cross-multiplying their row of data with the vector over here. The statistics alone is a rather neat bit of maths, but my measures are rather subjective and, in the absence of reliable historical data, the matrix wouldn't be much more than a table of the individual's characteristics. Arithmancy is quite helpful in predicting the most accurate numbers for the vector of coefficients...' she tapered off, seeming to realise that she'd been chattering on without a breath.

Hermione looked up, seemingly shocked to find Lucius still paying attention.

He cursed inwardly. She was brilliant, intriguing, captivating... and she probably detested him. Or perhaps not. She had, after all, taken his coat, accepted his flirtations without protest, and offered him her dessert, along with countless other niceties that he certainly hadn't expected. They seemed to have put the worst of their difficulties behind them. And was he imagining things, or was she leaning in more closely? She was! He could feel the tips of her ridiculous hair brushing his arm. He quietly cleared his throat and said, 'Miss Granger, your talents are entirely wasted in the Auror division.'

'Are they? And where might they be better spent?' she asked, in a tone that attempted scepticism but utterly failed to conceal her interest.

'The Department of Mysteries perhaps. Curse breaking for Gringotts. Working in spell creation. I'm sure there are any number of private industries that would be happy to have just a fraction of your time.'

Her body shifted towards him. He took the slightest of risks and brushed her hair over her shoulder. She swallowed thickly, but did not move away.

'Have you ever given it any thought?' He cut her off before she could answer. 'Of course you've thought about it, given how frustrated you are in the MLE. But you feel stuck, don't you? You're not sure what opportunities are out there.'

He leaned ever so slightly closer.

'You have no understanding of your... appeal,' he whispered. 'Do you?'

She shook her head, and her hair tickled his arm.

They stared at one another for a moment, then Lucius saw her lips part slightly. He mentally shoved his self-control out of the way and closed the gap between them, lifting his hand to cup the back of her head. He'd meant to kiss her gently, softly, but that intention quickly went the way of his self-control. Hungrily pulling her lower lip between his, he groaned. He couldn't help it. The thought that she might want this. Him.

She fisted the back of his shirt, pressing them together and crushing her breasts against him. Her tongue flicked against his. He gently sucked it into his mouth and was rewarded with an impatient cooing sound. Her hand reached down and squeezed his bum. He groaned again.

Suddenly she pushed him away, panting. He tried vainly to mask his confusion, frustration, hunger.

She scrambled to her feet, whispering, 'Someone's coming.' She crossed the room and pressed her body against the wall by the door.

The footsteps drew closer, and Lucius's body tensed. He quelled an absurd urge to shove her to the floor to shield her from harm. She was an Auror, sent to protect him, and had probably been trained for situations such as this. Besides, his duelling skills were rusty, at best, even with a wand. He held his breath, glancing at the clock on the desk.

The door creaked open. A short, brown-haired man with a slender build, whom Lucius had never seen before in his life, stalked into the room.

Lucius kept his eyes trained on the man, forcing himself not to glance at whatever Hermione was doing.

'Lucius! I'm -' he cried before Hermione kicked the back of the man's knee. He stumbled, his right side dipping towards the ground. She snatched the wand from the man's left hand. His eyes bugged in surprise, but before he could turn and face his attacker, Hermione's arm had snaked around his neck.

Lucius's heart stopped, frozen.

The crook of Hermione's arm gripped the man's neck and in seconds he was flat on the ground, passed out. She waved his wand experimentally. *Orchideous!* A shock of *Thelymitra grandiflora* erupted from the end of the wand. *Finite Incantatem!*

Lucius shook his head in disbelief. In less than three minutes, she had entirely dispatched their abductor.

She crouched next to the stranger and briefly examined the bruise forming across his neck before wielding his wand. *Jhcarcerous!*

She looked up at Lucius, her gaze not quite meeting his eyes. 'I need to go and make sure there's no one else around and try to find out where we are. He should stay passed out for a good while. Still... *Stupefy!*'

'Hermione.'

Startled, she looked up at him.

'Is this who you thought it was?'

'Yes, Lucius. It is.' Her eyes glinted with mischief.

'Well, who the hell is it?'

'You'll find out soon enough.' She grinned. 'He's taken Polyjuice; I can smell the Boomslang skin.'

She stood and moved towards the door. 'I'll be back soon. I'll ward the door to your touch so you can leave if something should happen to me,' she said over her shoulder.

She cast a Shielding Spell, a Silencing Charm, and a Disillusionment Charm that did not affect him. She gave him one last glance before peeking cautiously around the door frame.

Then she was gone. The door closed, and he was left alone with the man who'd harassed him for weeks, haunted him, abducted him. Lucius rolled up his sleeves and stared intently at the man, waiting for the moment when the Polyjuice would wear off, and this surreal mystery would begin making sense.

7

Chapter 7 of 10

The kidnapper revealed.

A/N: All hail the end of evil cliffies and awesome betas like DreamyDragon and Persevero.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money made. *hides behind flimsy disclaimer*

Hermione walked down the hallway towards the room where she'd spent the past four days. The house seemed quite secure. Between the original owner's wards and the new ones, she suspected this was the safest place in all of Europe, if not the world.

While portions of the house bore evidence of the new owner's decorating...if it could be called that...the majority of the house rather screamed Albus Dumbledore. Seven Chinese contortionists from the 1932 Wizarding World Circus Troupe literally *had* screamed "Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore" before cartwheeling out of their portrait. She still couldn't suss out the exact location of the house; the location spell she'd cast had stubbornly refused to reveal anything but "the summer home of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore". Still, it had calmed her harried nerves to know the lineage of the house; it was far more likely she'd encounter dancing teapots than a hexed object or an anti-Muggle jinx.

Having investigated the area thoroughly, she relaxed and thought back to the kiss she and Lucius had shared before their captor's interruption. If they'd had wands, she might have suspected him of befuddling her. Instead she'd fallen prey to his natural charm, which was far more ominous. She flushed as she remembered the kiss. Oh, it had been a *good* kiss.

She shook her head. As much as she wanted to puzzle through her feelings for that haughty pain in her arse, there was still work to be done, questions to be answered. Why they were here, and what business their captor had with them, for example.

Hermione quietly unwarded the door, unsure what scene awaited her on the other side. She congratulated herself for having left Lucius alone with the man while the Polyjuice wore off. After hearing Lucius talk about him so fondly, she'd suspected that finding out Severus Snape was alive...and had kidnapped them...would cause a maelstrom of emotions that Lucius would be loath to process in her company.

Lucius still crouched on the floor next to their abductor. After shutting the door quietly behind her, she was quite shocked to see him, tears still glistening on his cheeks and clutching Snape's hand.

'You were right, weren't you, Hermione?' Lucius asked quietly. 'Thank you.'

The reverence in his voice still surprised her. *Dammit! Focus!*

'There's no one else here. Well, except for the house-elf I accidentally stunned,' she said sheepishly. 'It seems Snape inherited this house from Albus Dumbledore, which explains why Severus Snape has a Room of Requirement in his home. Oh, and I found our wands.' She handed over Lucius's, wondering afterwards if it was the brightest idea to arm him.

'So, are you ready to find out what's going on?' she asked.

Lucius nodded, casting a spell Hermione didn't recognise to clear the physical evidence of his reaction to Snape's survival. The warmth she'd grown accustomed to seeing in his eyes was replaced with cold steel.

'*Ennervate*,' Hermione cast.

Severus Snape groaned and slowly stirred, wincing as he turned his head. He looked considerably better than the Snape from her memory...the one lying in a pool of blood in the Shrieking Shack. His hair brushed the top of his shoulders. He was heavier. His cheeks were tinged with pink rather than sallow or gaunt. Granted, the bruise blooming across his neck didn't make him the picture of health.

He squinted at her. 'Bugging hell! Hermione Granger? Did you conjure a twenty-five stone brute to flatten me, or was this your handiwork?'

'My handiwork entirely.' She continued pointing her wand at him. 'Perhaps you could resolve some mysteries here, Professor Snape. As well as this room has treated us, I'm rather looking forward to returning to my home.'

'I don't suppose you could be arsed to loosen my bonds or cast a Healing Spell. This neck has taken quite a bit of abuse over the years.'

Hermione glared at him before murmuring a basic healing charm. 'There, any internal damage should be healed. You'll need Bruise Paste to clear up the last of the bruising.'

Snape's eyes narrowed. 'Obviously, Miss Granger.'

She grabbed a piece of parchment off the desk and scribbled down several questions. 'Auror Granger, actually. How is it you survived the Shrieking Shack, Professor

Snape?'

'If I tell you, will you leave me in peace?'

'Perhaps,' she replied, making a point to flutter the business end of Snape's wand.

'Albus arranged a number of Portkeys tied to my physical well-being. After that damned snake bit me and I lost consciousness, one brought me here where Albus's rather *attentive* house elf, Fluffy,' he winced before continuing, 'cared for me.'

Snape's eyes, which had been trained on the wand, flicked away, searching the room. 'Lucius.' His voice wavered.

'Severus,' Lucius returned, his voice chilled, 'would you care to explain why you abducted us?'

'Is it so hard to believe that after surviving a long period of convalescence I wanted to see an old friend, Lucius?'

'Severus, kidnapping me for half a week hardly leaves me inclined to believe you.'

'Lucius, you idiot, I sent you the package with the Portkey four weeks ago, at a time when I was in Britain and available to meet you post haste.'

Hermione interjected, 'And where exactly have you been, Professor Snape?'

'I've been in the Maldives for two weeks, gathering a number of rare ingredients. You weren't meant to be here so long. Actually *Auror* Granger, you weren't meant to be here at all. Bloody hell, the house-elf was having an apoplectic fit when I Portkeyed back. Do you have any idea how much you've cost me between Sainsbury's and expenditure in *seven* different countries?'

'You send Fluffy to Sainsbury's?'

'Granger, do you take me for a complete fool? I taught her to use the internet. Thank Merlin for their delivery service. I simply *cannot* tolerate grocery shopping. You two spend more in a month than I do in a year!'

Hermione imagined Snape pushing a trolley through the aisles of Sainsbury's, glaring at the heels of the little old ladies inevitably blocking the entire tea aisle and scowling at children screaming at their mums for a box of Coco Rocks. Thank Merlin for Sainsbury's delivery service, indeed.

'Yes, it's quite clear that you aren't keen on grocery shopping. Lucius, Professor Snape here has an entire cupboard of white bread from Shoprite,' she accused, momentarily forgetting that Lucius was hardly acquainted with Muggle groceries. At Lucius's blank look, she explained, 'They were sold in 1994. He's had loaves of bread under Preservation Charms for over ten years!'

'*Auror* Granger, some of us do not require daily deliveries of Pain Poulain direct from Paris,' Severus ground out.

'Still,' she argued, 'you weren't even living here then! What, did you have Fluffy retrieve an entire cupboard full of old bread?'

Snape left the rhetorical question unanswered.

'So, the first package was the Portkey. What did you send to Mr. Malfoy in the shipments that followed?'

'How are you so certain the other packages weren't also Portkeys that either escaped your detection or didn't fall into Lucius's hands?'

As Hermione opened her mouth to respond, Snape sighed laboriously and continued, 'The other packages were not Portkeys. I found several texts that I thought would be of interest to Lucius, particularly given his penchant for wine, both magical and Muggle, and gardening. I especially thought Pratt's *Gardener's Guide to Fritillaries* would captivate him. Only Lucius would invest an entire greenhouse to beautiful, rare flowers which give off the stench of rotting faeces.'

'Honestly, Severus, it's not so difficult to remember to cast a Bubble-Head Charm before you enter the greenhouse,' Lucius said with a smirk.

'Yes, Lucius, it is. Granger, have you finished ascertaining whether I pose a threat to Lucius? I would very much like to renew my acquaintance with my friend. In private.'

'Professor Snape, as your Portkey has inconvenienced me for several days, I think you can spare a few more minutes to answer my questions. Why the Polyjuice?'

'I use it whenever I go out. Frankly, I'd rather the entire world not know of my existence. However, now that one of the "Golden Trio" has found me out, I'm certain that my anonymity has a life span of five minutes after I show you to my front door. I'd Oblivate you except I suspect the memory gap would be noticed during your next six-month *Auror* check-up.'

'I assure you, I'll leave you living in as much anonymity as possible. Yet, you do realise my supervisors will have noticed I was missing. I shall have to be quite creative to come up with a story with enough shreds of truth to be believable.' She glanced at her questions and continued, 'Why such a convoluted plan, Professor Snape? Why not Apparate to his home? Why not owl him to arrange a meeting?'

'Do you know how absurdly prohibitive his wards are? They might allow me to enter in my own form, but they won't allow access to someone who is Polyjuiced, Disillusioned, or under a glamour. On the off chance that Lucius does entertain visitors, I wouldn't dare Apparate to his home without a disguise. And how could I have possibly revealed my continued survival via owl? Even I am not that callous.'

She continued with her questions, ignoring Snape's mutterings that the entire interview was like having her back in the classroom all over again. In relatively short order, Snape gave terse answers to her inquiries regarding his whereabouts, his normal activities, who...if anyone...he was in contact with in the wizarding world, pseudonyms he'd used, his plans for the future, and why he'd waited until now to contact Lucius.

She left Snape and Lucius alone while she revived Fluffy and sat in Snape's study trying to concoct a plausible explanation for where she and Malfoy had been for three days. Was it three days? She counted the number of dinners. Oh, she would miss those dinners. The takeaway around the corner from her flat didn't begin to compare to the curried aubergine she'd eaten here.

At great length, she fabricated a story involving her parents, a mobile phone, and a Portkey they'd accidentally picked up from her flat. At the words "Muggle mobile phone", she was sure to scare off anyone in the department, save Harry. She sighed. There were a thousand places she'd rather go than back to her dingy office at the Ministry. Perhaps she should give some serious consideration to leaving. She did have some money saved up, after all.

She meandered over to the bookcases and blinked owlishly at them. The variety of texts was dizzying. Was this Snape's influence or Dumbledore's? She laced her fingers behind her back to keep herself from grabbing any of the books. Snape would probably treat such an invasion of his library as if she were rooting through his underwear drawer. She contented herself with skimming the spines.

Before she could ogle more than one or two shelves, Snape barged into the room with Lucius in tow. With scarcely two words, he escorted them outside, walked them to the edge of the property's wards and bade them farewell.

Lucius faced her. 'Hermione, I must leave. It's Thursday, and Draco will be expecting me at the manor for dinner shortly. I'm sure the house-elves have already alerted him to my absence, and I must see him before he does something foolish like report the two of us missing. I shall see you sometime?'

She nodded. With that Lucius Apparated. She looked at the house, or rather the direction of the house if the wards allowed it, and frowned. The excitement was over. Back to her flat. She kicked a rock, bouncing it against the wards, and Apparated.

8

Chapter 8 of 10

Those pesky Pure-blood traditions...

A/N: All hail the end of evil cliffies and awesome betas like DreamyDragon and Persevero.

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The gloomy weather outside her window suited Hermione perfectly. The week had been underwhelming, at best. Her carefully orchestrated script explaining her absence had been entirely worthless. Ron and Harry had been in the field supervising a training mission, and not a single member of the department had noticed that she was missing. The day after her return, she'd penned a letter tendering her resignation. Given the usual state of her boss's desk, she would probably continue to draw a salary for months before he finally noticed.

Hermione jumped, spilling tea all over the journal she was reading, as someone rapped on her door with enough force to rattle her china. She hurried towards the door, forcing her stomach out of her throat and back where it belonged. The wizard she hoped was on the other side surely wouldn't knock so loudly.

Severus Snape stood in front of her door, glaring with such loathing that she wondered if he'd been cultivating contempt during his seclusion.

She stepped back in surprise, and Snape took the opportunity, if not invitation, to stalk into her sitting room.

'I am not normally in the habit of intervening in such pedestrian matters as this, but...' he stopped abruptly, looking as if he were gagging on the words. 'My damned house-elf...'

'Fluffy?'

Snape gritted his teeth. 'Fluffy is threatening to systematically slam her fingers in all the doors and windows throughout the house if something isn't done. She heard it from Lucius's elf that he's drunk himself into a stupor, babbling on about his tragic rejection. You know he is over Narcissa, and you heard it from him while you were at my house: he never leaves the manor, Miss Granger. The only person he could possibly consider himself rejected by is you.'

Hermione gaped at Snape. 'I can hardly see how he would find himself rejected. He's not contacted me since I left your house.' She tried, and apparently failed, to mask the hurt in her voice.

'And yet you were hoping to hear from him.' Snape sighed loudly. 'Why do I get the idea there's more to this than you're telling me?'

'It was just one kiss,' Hermione mumbled, wondering in what alternate universe she'd found herself. Certainly, she was not actually in her sitting room with Severus Snape discussing her fleeting romance with Lucius Malfoy.

'Just a kiss, Miss Granger?' Snape looked astonishingly disturbed. 'I highly doubt that Lucius would frolic about doling out kisses willy-nilly. Please tell me you didn't accept any gifts from him.'

Hermione's brow furrowed at the abrupt question. 'Well, he did give me his jacket, and your house-elf mistakenly packed it in the box she handed me when I left.'

'I see. Did you offer him any food?'

'I gave him a bit of my chocolate-hazelnut torte. He seemed interested in why I was enjoying it so much. What? Is it so hard to believe I would share with Lucius Malfoy?'

'Lucius wasn't asking you to share, Miss Granger. He was flirting with you. He gave you food and drink in return, did he not?'

Hermione looked at Snape as if he'd just returned from Mars rather than the Maldives.

'Is this your idea of punishing Lucius for his past sins, Miss Granger?'

'What on earth do you mean, Snape?'

For once, Snape must have believed her look of innocence and confusion. 'Do you mean to tell me... Miss Granger, for all your vaunted intelligence and love of knowledge, no matter how trivial, I cannot believe you have never researched Pure-blood courting rituals.'

'Pure-blood courting rituals?' Hermione asked dumbly, a sinking feeling settling into her gut.

'Yes, Lucius wasn't simply asking for a bit of cake. He was following a set of rituals as old as Hogwarts.'

'This isn't a binding set of rituals is it? Is there some way to cancel the courtship? Would I feel physical side effects for ignoring the bond? Is this permanent?' The questions tumbled from her mouth, and she was left wishing she could stuff them back in.

'Miss Granger, do you automatically panic like this in every situation and assume that some inescapable tragedy has occurred? It's a wonder you made it through your school years with Potter without having a nervous breakdown. No, this isn't a binding set of rituals.'

Snape must have seen the look of relief and mortification that flashed across her face. His eyes narrowed as he sharpened his tongue. 'Ah, been feeling a bit blue in his absence, have you? Did you think for a moment that you might be able to blame it on some ridiculous bonding?'

He sneered. 'No, Miss Granger, while the magic involved can intensify the emotions slightly, I fear whatever spot of depression you've been experiencing stems entirely from whatever attraction you actually feel for him. Have a bit of a thing for older men do you? How predictable. Already frightened off all the men your age?'

She willed herself not to crumble in the face of his vitriol. 'Careful, *Professor*, your vehemence might make a girl think you're jealous.'

Snape's jaw dropped and he blinked at her, dumbfounded.

'Honestly, Snape, if you're interested all you have to do is ask.' Hermione admired the look she'd caused on Snape's features. She hadn't thought Snape could ever look flummoxed. Icy. Irate. Caustic. All were classic Snape looks that had been paraded in the halls and classrooms of Hogwarts for years. Who knew that Snape was physically able to flummox?

'Have we got that over with, then? Excellent. Now, listen here.' Her wand poked at Snape's chest. 'I'm not aiming to hurt Lucius, but given my ignorance of obscure courting rituals, which you have so graciously pointed out to me,' she paused to freshen her glare, 'It is possible that I have inadvertently caused Lucius's distress. Now, perhaps we can stop bickering, and you can escort me to the manor.'

Snape snorted but nodded his assent.

'Good. Give me a few moments to cancel some appointments I had this afternoon.' She walked towards the Floo and crouched in front of it, suddenly aware that it was impossible to Floo without wagging one's derriere in the air. Her lips pursed in annoyance as she called Harry to cancel lunch. Then Ginny to cancel their shopping excursion. Then her mum to cancel tea.

'Are you quite finished with your social calls, Miss Granger?'

She glared at him from her spot on the hearth. There was the chance that this excursion could last a while, and it wasn't as if she'd exactly been anticipating her dinner plans. 'Just one more.' She Flooed Ron and cancelled dinner.

'You know,' she stood, brushing flecks of soot from her trousers, 'You're lucky you never kissed Lucius. He could be pining after you if that were the case.'

What passed for colour on Snape's face drained away. 'Oh, bugger. We must leave immediately.'

'What?' she asked, her eyes widening.

'Dammit, witch. I've given Lucius a book, clothed him, and fed him for a week!'

She tried, she really did, but she just couldn't stifle her grin. 'You're a little panicky there, Snape. Did you two have fun catching up while I was upstairs in your parlour?'

'Whatever do you mean?'

'Well, did you kiss him last week?' She forced her grin to remain planted on her face. Honestly, she'd been given the boot by far lesser wizards than Lucius Malfoy. Still, it was a bit insulting that he'd moved on less than two hours after he'd kissed her. She snorted. *Though he does seem the fickle type.*

'Um, no, I didn't kiss him last week.' Snape looked decidedly uncomfortable and... guilty?

'But you have kissed him, haven't you?'

'That is hardly any of your business, Granger.' Snape picked at a loose button on the front of his shirt before tapping it with his wand.

Oh, fuck. He had. Severus Snape had kissed Lucius Malfoy. Hermione tamped down the shiver of excitement that skipped down her spine. It ignored her efforts and raced back up to deliver hi-res images to her cerebral cortex. Oh, merciful Merlin. Awkward, young Snape from those Pensieve memories delivering a tentative kiss to a beautiful, teenage Lucius. Angry Snape from his Death Eater days pressing Lucius against a wall for a frantic snog. Half-drunk, despondent Headmaster Snape meeting with Lucius for a hurried liaison under the cover of night.

'Granger!' Snape barked, jerking her from her reverie. He glared at her, seething at her open-mouthed blank expression.

'Erm, yes?' She nonchalantly attempted to check her chin for drool. Oh, she'd seen men kissing before, but she'd never *imagined* men kissing. And she'd certainly never thought about *those men* kissing. And never, ever, had she considered the man standing before her attractive. But she couldn't shake those images from her mind *is it just a trick of my libido?* she wondered. *Or is he that, er, appealing in real life?* She glanced up at him and tried to keep her eyes from looking him up and down appreciatively. She failed.

'If you're interested, Miss Granger, all you have to do is ask. Now come on.' Snape smirked before stomping towards her front door.

'If you're going to trade flirtations with me, you may as well use my first name. Otherwise, it sounds like you're chasing after a student.' She grinned cheekily at him. 'Perv.'

'You have no idea, *Hermione*,' he replied, holding the door open for her.

9

Chapter 9 of 10

Lucius is "rescued".

A/N: This was written for the first ever LM/HG exchange for Shiv5468. My undying thanks to betas of dreams DreamyDragon and Persevero for some extremely spectacular work under the duress of constant hunger from food porn. Kudos as well to BlueParis for advice on hand-to-hand combat. Prompts will be listed after the last chapter.

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Snape and Granger, or rather Hermione and Severus, given the peace accord they'd just reached, Apparated to the front steps of Malfoy Manor and were quickly ushered inside by Tildy.

'Master is beside himself with grief.' The elf's eyes narrowed even as she wrung her hands. 'You are looking guilty. Fix this,' she said before shoving them into the study.

The very study where Lucius Malfoy sat, entirely sober with nary a tear to be seen. He sipped his tea and gazed out the window overlooking the west lawns. 'Ah, Severus, Hermione. I wondered when you might show up. I was growing concerned that the afternoon's tea might be wasted.'

Beside her, Severus snorted. 'Yes, poor Lucius. Surely, you must know that working a legion of house-elves into panic is no way to secure your intended's affections.'

His intended's affections? Did Severus really think that Lucius... why that little sneak! The both of them, really. First Severus and his Portkey fiasco...and now this? Do Slytherins hatch an eight-step plan for everything? Not that I don't appreciate a good plan, but this seems a bit Heath Robinson. Wait... did he mean for both of us to come here? Her eyes widened. Well, that certainly changed matters a bit.

Hermione scrambled to recall what she'd read in Bartimeus Bonrève's *Cultural Foundations and Traditions of Wizarding Triad Relationships*. She'd snagged the book from Grimmauld Place at the beginning of her, Harry's, and Ron's quest for Horcruxes. A bit naïve at the time, she really hadn't expected the text to cover the history, practice, and, er, spatial geometry involved in wizarding ménages à trois. The illustrations alone had eased many a dull and lonely night in her room in that cursed tent.

Given the predicament, it was a pity she'd usually fallen asleep before the chapter on the rituals involved in starting a relationship. But Snape's caustic summary of the basics jogged her memory a bit. If what she remembered was correct, since Lucius was the initiating party, he would be offering a repast for her and Severus and leading a discussion on the parameters of their relationship. She fully expected Lucius to take the most circuitous route possible in laying out the terms of whatever arrangement he desired.

Lucius turned to face them, waving his hand dismissively. 'On the contrary, Severus. I would think that Hermione would look kindly on such loyalty and devotion from my house-elves.' Lucius levitated his tea tray to a cosy sitting area on the south side of the room. 'Won't you two join me for tea?'

Lucius's spread did not disappoint. His menu at Severus's was clearly not a deviation from his usual fare.

The silence that followed wasn't exactly awkward. She desperately tried to recall any of the additional details from either the chapter on factors to consider when pursuing such a relationship or the chapter on Pureblood rituals. She knew Lucius was supposed to begin the conversation, but she was grasping at straws on the other details. She cursed her lax reading habits. When Severus had brought up the courting rituals at her flat, she certainly hadn't expected this. Although, based on Severus's surprise, it seemed that he hadn't, at least initially, expected this particular situation either.

She relaxed in her chair. If, by unspoken agreement, it was up to Lucius to break the silence, she had some time to mull over the situation. If she decided to pursue this...although, honestly, what woman in her right mind would turn down the two men in front of her...hopefully, she could follow Severus's lead on how to respond to Lucius's invitation.

Until then, however, she was going to enjoy the delicate chocolate biscuits. She plucked one from the tray and sighed happily as the fractured flakes melted on her tongue. The lemon wafers were nothing to sniff at either. And the scones. She was certain she'd never had clotted cream this heavenly before.

At length, Lucius spoke. 'Severus, I've been reading your gift of Pratt's *Gardener's Guide to Fritillaries*.' He paused for a moment, watching Severus take a sip of his tea. 'Did you know that the stem of the Snake's Head Fritillary yields a substance that can be used to brew a spectacular water-based lubricant?'

Hermione flinched as Severus's tea narrowly missed soaking her hair.

'Lucius! Do show some restraint in front of Miss Granger!'

'Why, Severus, I'm merely engaging you on a topic of mutual interest.' Lucius feigned innocence just as poorly now as he had ten years before.

Hermione wondered for a moment if her take on the situation had been entirely wishful thinking. The biscuits dropped like lead to the bottom of her stomach.

Severus glowered at the blond. 'You've clearly lured us here with a specific goal in mind, Lucius. What is it?'

'So direct, Severus. It's hardly your style.'

Severus did not respond, but maintained his glare.

With a dismissive sigh and eye-roll, Lucius said, 'I brought both of you here because I believe the three of us should form an... alliance of sorts.'

'You want,' Severus spoke in a cold, measured tone, 'the three of us to pursue a relationship.'

'Precisely, my friend.'

'And why on earth would I want any more time in Granger's company than you've already forced me to endure?'

Ouch. Given the curious placement of Severus's plate of biscuits, she'd rather thought he'd suspected Lucius's intent and was aiming to hide the evidence. And what was with this Granger business? Wasn't this the man who'd flirted with her in her flat?

Lucius quailed momentarily at Severus's comment. Clearly, he'd expected Severus to follow along without argument. Hermione suspected she should find this flattering. Instead it was fairly irksome. Had Lucius just assumed they would follow along without argument after his manipulation?

Severus's stare was calculating. 'Lucius, I no longer have the patience for your, or anyone's, machinations. Spit it out now. What do you, Hermione, and I stand to gain from this arrangement?'

Lucius's calculating look traversed the length of Severus's body. 'You want the bald truth, Severus?'

Severus nodded in response. 'I believe that is what a normal wizard of upstanding character would do.'

Lucius ignored Hermione's tea-filled snort and launched a more detailed sales pitch on the arrangement. 'Each of us offers something of particular benefit to the others and, in turn, will profit in his or her own way from the arrangement.'

Severus grumbled something about mutual parasitism before motioning for Lucius to continue.

'Each of us has been isolated for our own reasons and, to varying degrees, craves companionship. You wouldn't have sent me the books otherwise, Severus.'

Severus acknowledged this truth with a curl of his lip.

'Once your return is made public...and you know quite well that it inevitably will be...you will be inundated with requests for your company. Harry Potter himself has lauded your actions in the war. You shall be hailed as a prodigal hero and welcomed with open arms. It will be quite to your advantage to have us at your side. Our established relationship will deflect the majority of any unwanted attentions.'

Severus frowned over his teacup, seemingly considering the merits of Lucius's proposition in the face of a rather undesirable future.

Hermione tried to look uninterested. Her expression faltered when she saw the appraising looks both men sent in her direction. She would personally hunt down Severus

Snape and cast an exhausting number of hexes upon his manhood if he bugged this up.

Lucius angled slightly in his seat to face her more directly. 'Despite the obvious boost to my reputation I stand to gain from allying myself with two war heroes, for my part, I confess an honest affection and interest in both of you.'

Her stomach somersaulted at Lucius's confession. Before their stay...it was hard to call it a kidnapping any more...she'd might have expected such a declaration to be accompanied by a flirtatious wink and grin. But Lucius's face was the picture of seriousness. He seemed quite sincere.

'Severus, despite that surly exterior you project...and yes, I know you're interested; your current attempt at aloof disinterest is about to shatter a piece from one of my oldest tea services...I have known you in the past to be a very generous lover. You are attentive, caring, and bring an intellect that promises stimulating conversation both in and out of the bedroom.'

Hermione watched in shock as Severus Snape blushed. Lucius had chiselled straight through Severus's stony outer shell and revealed the curious...her eyes flickered to the plate in question...and apparently eager wizard beneath. Her mind immediately conjured several ways that she could thank Lucius for his efforts.

Lucius continued, 'Hermione, you are quite the unexpected gem. You are beguiling, fascinating, and will likely run mental circles around the both of us. You stand to gain two partners who will be attentive to your needs, both physically and intellectually, and constantly keep you on your toes. Surely you don't find this objectionable? After all, you did return my kiss while we were staying at Severus's.'

Hermione fidgeted in her seat. She tried to look as if she'd heard any of Lucius's words other than 'kiss' and 'Severus'. How on earth did one respond to an offer such as this? Her body fairly screamed 'victory dance', complete with choreographed striptease en route to wherever Lucius kept his rooms. Her brain interrupted, suggesting that a more measured response would be appropriate. After all, she had quite a bit to gain from a lengthy negotiation.

Taking a sip of her tea, she replied carefully, 'Well, Lucius, if I decide to proceed with this, how do you foresee things progressing? Severus, how much longer are you looking to perpetuate the rumour of your death? Lucius seems to be pushing for some public outings, and I'm not sure how long I'll be able to maintain the ruses required for a clandestine affair. Not when my energies could be, erm, better spent.'

Lucius's expression thawed at her show of interest. 'I believe it would be wise for us to become physically comfortable with one another before we take our relationship public. It wouldn't do for us to act like nervous first years in each other's presence.'

Both Severus and Hermione nodded in agreement. Their eyes met as each reached for a biscuit. Hermione willed herself not to glance away in nervousness and held his gaze steadily.

'Besides, Severus has been in seclusion for years. I suspect he'll require hours of private tuition before he's fit for the public eye.'

Hermione watched in panic as Severus's body tensed and his eyes narrowed.

Lucius continued, 'A month's worth of shags might be required for the man to loosen up enough to sit in our presence without a plate covering his lap.'

Hermione gasped. Honestly! Lucius should know better than to tease Severus when the details of their arrangement hadn't even been settled. Severus looked positively mutinous, and she leapt to his defence. 'Lucius, stop it. You'll drive him out of here before we've even managed our first kiss.'

Lucius smiled, though the effect was shark-like rather than attractive, and leaned forward in his seat. 'Looking forward to that, are you? By all means, go ahead, Hermione. I certainly won't stop you.'

Severus interjected, 'Enough, Lucius. We've tacitly agreed to your plan. Hermione and I shall kiss when we see fit.'

Oh, Merlin. Now? Please? Now? Do they have any idea how much they're torturing me? A quick glance in Severus's direction revealed that yes, yes, he did realise precisely the effect his words had made. *Oh, great, and Lucius too. Damn smirking bastards.*

'You do realise that teasing and taunting me isn't exactly going to make me eager to begin this little affair, don't you?'

'Your body language would suggest...'

'Lucius, exactly how much stroking does your ego require?' Severus barked.

'Nor will the bickering make me keen on starting this little adventure. In fact, it's nearly reminding me of the last time I met Harry and Ron for dinner...not the most appealing of images, I assure you.'

Severus bristled visibly at the comparison. Lucius leaned over, placing his hand on Severus's knee. Ignoring Severus's startled jump and the subsequent lurch of his precious tea service's plate, Lucius explained, 'She has a point, Severus. Perhaps we should resolve some of the logistical issues so we can proceed to more... pleasant matters.'

Hermione scuttled her hopes that pleasant matters would arrive *sometime* in the next month.

'I think dinner together two to three times a week would be a pleasant enough start. That should give us a chance to get to know one another a bit better before we sign any formal agreements. Perhaps once Severus stops flinching when someone touches him we can progress to overnight stays.'

Bugger. No pleasant matters for at least three months, then.

Lucius continued, 'Will you add Hermione to your wards, Severus? Or shall we meet here indefinitely?'

Hermione was wondering whatever was wrong with her flat when Severus replied, 'Actually, I already have done, Lucius.'

Jaws hit the floor.

'I have no objection to hosting both of you in my home. In fact, I suspect your presence will make Fluffy relent in her protests. She refuses to make my sandwiches and is insisting that I let her grow vegetables in the back garden,' he continued.

'Oh, quit whingeing, Severus. You'll soon need more substantial food to keep up your strength. I'll grant Fluffy access to the Malfoy gardens.'

Lucius looked at his clock. 'Curses, I've got dinner guests arriving in twenty-five minutes. Shall we have dinner on Tuesday evening at seven?'

At Hermione's and Severus's nods of agreement, Lucius stood from his chair and rushed towards the door. 'I must change into formal robes. I shall see you on Tuesday, then.'

'Lucius,' Hermione called, stopping him just as he left the room, 'and you too, Severus, next time you want to arrange a meeting, send an owl!'

Lucius chuckled and left the room.

Rising stiffly from his chair, Severus grumbled, 'I suppose that's our cue to leave.' He walked to the door, holding it open as Hermione approached.

'Well, this certainly wasn't how I expected to spend my Thursday afternoon,' Hermione mumbled.

Laughing, Severus replied, 'Hermione, if you were anyone other than the person who tackled me from behind and knocked me unconscious in my own home, I might take steps to make sure you didn't feel obligated or pressured into the arrangement Lucius has described. However, I suspect you would make your mind quite known if you objected to any portion of the agreement, no matter how small.'

Hermione searched his expression for any sign of maliciousness and was satisfied to find none. 'You're bloody right, I'd speak up. Lucius seems to have an impish streak that I'd certainly not expected.'

Severus snorted. 'You don't know half of it.'

'Good thing I have some time to reach my final decision, then.' She certainly had some reading to do before Tuesday's dinner, particularly given that bit about formal agreements.

Together they wound their way through the hallways of the manor until, at last, they reached the front hall. It was empty; presumably the house-elves were scurrying around in preparation for dinner.

Again, Severus held the door for Hermione, and they began walking towards the hedges that marked the edge of the property. Hermione shivered as she passed through the ward.

Stepping through behind her, Severus said in a near whisper, 'Hermione.'

Whipping around, she caught the look in his eyes and felt a flutter of hope. 'Yes?' she replied throatily and then coughed, ruining the effect entirely.

Severus smiled and took a step closer. 'I believe we need to even things up a bit,' he murmured and dipped his head.

His lips pressed against hers briefly, as if brushing a hand across a pool. He pulled back a millimetre and then dived in. The kiss escalated as their tongues flicked against each other, both inviting the other to continue the adventure, hopefully taking it to its natural conclusion.

Oh, gods. She was frantically kissing Severus Snape, clawing at his back as if to rip the blasted robes from his body, on the front lawn of Malfoy Manor where anyone could walk up, and she was considering shoving him to the ground for considerably more than a snog. Severus's body dipped, and she felt him pressing against her. She whined when he ended the contact.

'You know Lucius is probably watching, don't you?' Severus mumbled, pulling away.

'Fuck Lucius,' she cried, gripping Severus's head and pulling him in for another kiss.

He groaned and clutched her arse, grinding their bodies even closer together. 'We should stop. Not here. Not now. Not without Lucius.'

Groaning in frustration, Hermione pushed Severus away, panting audibly. 'Yes, you're right, of course. Just one more?'

'Absolutely not. I wouldn't survive it.' Severus adjusted his clothing, trying to disguise his leers at her similarly dishevelled state. 'I shall see you on Tuesday.' He Disillusioned himself and strode away.

Hermione leaned a palm against the hedge, scrambling to catch her breath. Tuesday. She only had to wait until Tuesday. Assuming she didn't combust before then. She strode off, missing the flicker of curtain from a room on the second floor.

A/N: This next and final chapter will contain SS/HG/LM. My apologies for not including this in the story warnings as it would have thoroughly ruined some of the surprise and mystery. If this isn't your cup of tea, my apologies. (I can say that it's rather tastefully and humorously done if you're willing to take the risk). If this IS your thing... well aren't you a lucky duck? :)

Heath Robinson is the British equivalent of Rube Goldberg. Insanely complicated machines designed to do something typically quite simple. You know... the bowling ball rolls to knock over a candle which lights a rope which releases a balloon and so on.

Epilogue

Chapter 10 of 10

"Cultural Foundations and Traditions of Wizarding Triad Relationships" applied.

A/N: Enormous thanks again to my extraordinary betas, DreamyDragon and Persevero. Their help was priceless.

Disclaimer: All characters (and capitalized verbs) belong to J. K. Rowling. I make no profit from this tale.

Hermione awoke, sweating profusely, from a dream in which she'd been hired to transfigure seventeen black, Peruvian jaguars to camouflage them while they were on holiday in the Sahara. 'S'hot,' she mumbled, nudging Severus in what might have been his kidney.

'Effing Cooling Charms,' he muttered, groping for his wand.

Hermione shivered as a blissful wave of Arctic air swirled through the bedroom. She reached down and grabbed the covers she'd kicked off during her slumber and burrowed in between her companions. Sleeping next to one man was like having a furnace in bed. Sleeping between two was rather like holding a barbecue in the fiery centre of a volcano.

She'd nearly drifted back to sleep when she felt Lucius's fingers tracing her hip. 'Stop it. 'm sleeping.'

Lucius responded with a trail of kisses down her neck. Her elbow connected with his navel. 'Go. Away.'

Severus snorted into his pillow. 'You know what he's like when he wakes up in the mood. Why even bother resisting?'

'Because I'm bloody tired, sore, and decidedly *not* in the mood.' She raised her head, looking over Severus's shoulder. 'The sun's not even fully risen.' She could practically feel Lucius's smirk boring through the back of her head. She grabbed a pillow and shoved it over her head.

She was utterly drained from the previous night's activities. They'd had their first date in public with accompanying media fanfare. By the time they'd left the restaurant, the street outside was swarming with reporters and curious spectators. They'd given a statement and a photo-op that had most women in the crowd swooning. Then they'd returned to the manor for a gold medal routine of sexual gymnastics...floor exercises to be specific. Over. Under. In. Out. Beneath. Between. Behind. Particularly behind. Really, they had exhausted all prepositions, positions, and permutations by the end of the night. She grumbled at the thought of moving any body parts in the next ten days. Mercifully, her wizards let her drift back to sleep.

She next awakened to the sensation of lips on both her nipple and the back of her neck, fingers ghosting across her thighs, and the bodies of her lovers pressed against her. Their legs were tangled, and she could feel the weight of their erections against her. She opened her eyes to find Severus's dark head at her breast. A glance at the clock showed it was after eight, a far more reasonable time than whatever ungodly hour it had been earlier. It helped, too, that she wasn't roasting and had managed at least six hours of sleep. She stroked Severus's hair appreciatively, arching her back to encourage his efforts.

'About bloody time you woke up,' Severus grouched as he lifted his mouth then blew a breath across her skin. He then sucked her nipple forcefully into his mouth, and she moaned at the sharp, abrupt sensation. He fumbled at the bedside table, finally retrieving a phial of potion and tipping it to her lips. Oh, thank Nimue, Severus's special blend of pain relief and muscle relaxant.

Lucius shifted slightly behind her, and she felt his cock slide in between her legs. She rocked against him, thrilling when she heard him gasp.

'Mmmmm, so eager.'

'Yes, well, the two of you must have been hard at work this...ooh,' she broke off as he clutched her hip and slipped inside her.

'Quite. You're lucky you woke up. Any longer and we might have just had to start without you,' Lucius drawled.

She turned her head to glare at him. Once, just once, he had begun intercourse while she was still asleep. Lucius had learned the hard way that Hermione's Auror reflexes and surprise morning sex were a nearly lethal combination. 'One would think you'd have learned better.'

'I rather value having my limbs intact, thank you. I meant that Severus and I would have begun enjoying one another without you.'

She clenched at the thought of waking to such a sight.

Lucius moaned. 'Oh, fuck. You like that idea, do you?'

Whatever she might have said in reply was stifled as Severus scooted up the bed, abandoning her breasts and kissing his way up her neck to her mouth. Both she and Lucius gasped as Severus's cock rubbed against both his partners.

Severus rocked against them, timing his movements with that of his tongue. Oh, he was clever. So very, very clever. Her lovers had become quite adept at orchestrating tandem performances and quickly worked out tempo and choreography so a chorus of moans punctuated each beat. Hers were just starting to crescendo when she abruptly found herself lying in the middle of the bed alone.

'We'll be back in a moment, Hermione,' Lucius mumbled.

Hermione sighed and closed her eyes, determined to relax in preparation for whatever they were planning. She had felt Lucius reach over to caress Severus. They seemed to have worked out a code of sorts, so they could simultaneously execute some manoeuvre or other. She suspected they thought themselves ingenious, but really it infuriated rather than impressed her. First, because she loathed being excluded from any conversation that involved her and secondly, because well, she did *not* like surprises...even when they involved being suddenly flipped over and shagged into oblivion.

They were still very much working the knots out of their fledgling relationship. The three of them had rather, erm, challenging personalities at times, and it had taken several dinners before they began to relax in one another's company. Hermione and Severus both had struggled to shed the defensive stubbornness they wore like second skins. Lucius and Severus had relinquished the more grating of their Slytherin tendencies when it became apparent that Hermione usually cottoned on and did not take kindly to their little schemes. Hermione and Lucius had learned to quell any inclination to tease Severus. Instead, they took their impishness out on one another; their self-confidence could tolerate the taunts.

In short, the three had learned to trust one another.

Hermione was immensely thankful that she'd kept her copy of *Cultural Foundations and Traditions of Wizarding Triad Relationships* Severus and Lucius had been quite resistant to its guidance at the beginning of their relationship. She'd worked in some of the recommended discussion points easily enough, but they'd flat out refused to look at the book's guidance on positioning and physical preparations. They had bristled at the insinuation that their vast...well, in Lucius's case, at least...experience in single-partner coupling wouldn't provide them with adequate experience. Their first time, to say the least, had *not* been magical. They'd had to stop when Lucius accidentally blackened Severus's eye with his elbow, and Hermione had somehow managed to pull a groin muscle.

Thank Merlin that Lucius had insisted the trio spend an excruciating amount of time outside the bedroom, growing accustomed to one another's temperaments. Had the near-disastrous coupling occurred earlier, she suspected one or more of them would have erupted in anger, ending the fun before it even began.

Instead, they'd agreed on a short recess in festivities while Severus procured phials of Bruise Paste and Muscle Healing Ointment and Lucius had recovered the text. The two men had then alternated between reading the text aloud and applying rather more doses of the Muscle Healing Ointment than might have been necessary. Hermione had been fairly certain that oral stimulation of areas surrounding the pulled muscle had also not been part of the instructions for use, though she'd wisely held her tongue on the matter.

Yes, they certainly still had things to work out. Like this stupid secret hand gesture business. She cast her momentary flash of anger aside. She'd wangle their little language of gestures out of them at some point. After all, it wasn't as if Lucius and Severus didn't show her every courtesy during such occasions, usually leading her to orgasm so many times that she more than lost count; she forgot the meaning of numbers entirely. Still, she did need to bring up the annoyance, sometime when they weren't...*Oh my gods! What on earth is Lucius doing with his tongue? Or is that Severus?*

She revelled in the sensation, her dimmed arousal returning with a rush. Presumably, she had moaned at his efforts; she felt his answering laugh reverberate across a number of rather excited portions of her anatomy. Yes, definitely Lucius. Wait a moment. Severus was in front of her and Lucius behind her, just as before. They hadn't even switched positions? What was that little bit of abandonment about? She was just about to ask what was going on when she heard the sound of a cork popping out of a phial. There hadn't been one on the table earlier. Quite odd, really. It wasn't like Severus not to be prepared in advance.

Lucius tugged at her hips and rolled her over to face him. His fingers toyed with her breast, teasing the surrounding skin and then plucking the nipple. 'Hermione, you looked delectable spread out across the bed.' His lips captured hers, and their tongues slid across one another. She reached down to stroke him.

She basked in his attentions for several moments before she guided Lucius onto his back, rising above him to conveniently position her breasts near his mouth. Propping himself on his elbows, he sucked a nipple in between his lips. Pleasure coursed through her. She couldn't tolerate waiting any longer and sank down upon him. Severus would undoubtedly catch up. Groaning, Lucius lay back on the bed, his hips moving slowly against hers.

She heard a clinking noise from the direction of the bedside table. She gasped as she felt Severus's fingers pressing against her and then caressing Lucius on an upstroke, reminding her of a conversation they'd had over breakfast earlier in the week. Without looking, she knew what potion sat beside the bed. Severus must have finished that lubricant Lucius had mentioned all those weeks ago, the one with the Snake's Head Fritillary. Both men were exceedingly proud of the concoction, pleased beyond measure that they'd found something to enhance their pleasures that hadn't come from *Cultural Foundations and Traditions of Wizarding Triad Relationships*

All three groaned as the product of Severus's labour tingled as it warmed. She admitted to herself that her lovers might have been right to fuss over the blasted lubricant. Oh, yes, this was quite worth the hours of harvesting the disgusting flowers and listening to Lucius and Severus ramble on about fritillary species and sub-species over breakfast.

Lucius moaned against her, interrupting the kisses that he'd been delivering to her shoulder and neck. 'Severus, I don't think I ever thanked you for that particular text.'

Severus continued to move slowly, drawing out each stroke until she could hardly bear it. 'You're welcome, Lucius. I'm rather pleased with the turn of events myself. Who knew Muggle internet delivery would move Lucius Malfoy into such a momentous sequence of events?'

'Severus, Lucius, loves of my life, I never thought I would say this, but could you please shut up about that book?' Hermione ground out, just as Lucius tilted his hips, ensuring that soon the book would be furthest from her mind. Behind her, Severus snorted. She turned to glare at him.

'Oh, come now, Hermione. You must admit it was amusing,' Lucius murmured, reaching up to stroke her breast.

'I *would* like to come now, thank you. You two scampered off and left me earlier! Whoops. She'd rather meant to leave that discussion until later. After the sex, preferably.'

'I apologise, Hermione. The potion had some rather delicate timing right at the end. I suppose we ought to have explained when we first awakened you. I promise we shall make it up to you,' Severus explained, pausing for a moment and clutching her to him. 'I'm sorry.'

As Severus let go, Lucius pulled her down for a kiss. 'And I as well.'

She smiled against Lucius's kiss. 'Oh, all right then. Perhaps we can recommence with the making it up to me?' she asked, wiggling between them.

Severus let out a hiss of breath and began the rhythm he had abandoned earlier, his movements driving Hermione against Lucius. Lucius continued stroking her breasts, sending her pleasure even higher.

His words punctuated by Severus thrusts, Lucius praised Severus. 'Gods, he's learned a fair bit about topping, hasn't he?'

'Mmm, yes,' Hermione replied. Her arms worn from bearing the weight of Severus's thrusts, she lowered herself against Lucius, sucking his lower lip between hers.

Severus's pace increased again, and Lucius's face disappeared as her eyes fluttered shut. They continued kissing until she cried out as Severus ratcheted the tempo even higher. Moans accompanied each thrust of his hips, and it was not long before Hermione felt both men begin to tense. Oh, thank Nimue! She'd been hoping for a repeat of that one time they'd managed to come together. Finally, she felt the beginnings of her own orgasm and clutched Lucius tightly. Her lips frantically scrabbled at his, and, before long, her senses fell away.

When her thoughts refocused, she was smiling against Lucius's chest, flattened underneath Severus. Grunting, she nudged Severus. Sated, the three rolled off one another and collapsed on the bed, Hermione in the middle once again.

'Thank you again, Severus,' Lucius said wearily, leaning over Hermione to capture Severus's lips between his own. They continued for several moments, a brief flicker of tongue occasionally indicating who had the lead at the moment. Had she not been utterly drained, she'd have tried to talk one of them into seconds of some variety. She loved watching the two men kiss. Even in her foulest moods, seeing them exchange, well, affection of any sort usually sent her desire skyrocketing. Now, her heart warmed at the sight.

Hermione smiled as she watched. Exhausted, the two men finally broke apart and flopped back on the bed, bodies curled against her.

'So, Severus, when did you finish the potion?'

'About nine o'clock this morning. Damned thing had to cool for thirty-six hours, then simmer for five minutes.'

Ah, that explained the intermission. 'That eager to try it, were you? I cannot believe you two ran out in the middle of sex and left me here.'

Severus had the good grace to look embarrassed.

Lucius snorted. 'He claimed concern that the potion might lose its efficacy over time.'

'Oh? And how many trials will you require to test this hypothesis?'

'Dozens.'

'Well, I'm glad Lucius's reading bore fruit. Severus, did I ever tell you who Lucius thought had sent the packages?' Hermione asked groggily, unsure as to why the image of Lucius, pacing frantically in his study had suddenly come to mind.

Lucius made vague noises of protest that were muffled entirely by the pillow.

'I'm almost afraid to ask,' Severus said to her right shoulder.

'Some tribe of Amazons in South America.' She giggled, despite her fatigue.

Severus's chuckle shook the bed.

'Ah, yes. Have a laugh at the Pure-blood's expense,' Lucius said wryly.

'Lucius?' Hermione asked.

'What, Hermione?' he inquired.

'You never did tell me what Severus sent in those other packages.'

Lucius snorted into the pillow before rolling over. 'Severus sent an assortment of items associated with my personal interests and hobbies.'

Hermione poked him in the side. 'Such as?'

'A wine aerator.'

'And?'

'Something called a gardening multi-tool.'

'And? Merlin, Lucius, this is like pulling teeth!'

Severus mumbled, 'And you would know.'

Sighing, Lucius replied, 'He sent me a number of leather implements which I shall proceed to test upon your bottom if you continue with such impertinent questions.'

'Lucius!' she squawked.

The bed rumbled as Severus laughed. 'He's only teasing, Hermione. I'm sure Lucius would much rather you try them out on him.'

Lucius grunted in agreement and began softly snoring moments later. Hermione lay awake for a moment, listening to Lucius's gentle snores and the soft puffs of breath that heralded Severus's departure to the land of dreams. Despite everyone's peculiarities, including scampering off mid-tryst to recover a potion, their arrangement was turning out rather nicely, seemingly approaching something of a long-term arrangement.

Leaning over Severus, she grabbed her wand from the bedside table and cast another round of Cooling Charms before settling back in between her lovers and closing her eyes.

A/N: Thanks so much to everyone who has read and reviewed!

Below are the fantastic prompts from Shiv5468 that inspired this story:

2. Someone is making death threats against Lucius. Hermione is sent along by the Ministry to investigate partly because they don't think she'll try too hard, and partly because everyone thinks of her as a bookworm with no practical skills rather forgetting her contribution in the war. Hermione kicks bottom, Lucius is impressed, hot sexxors ensue.

4. Hermione doesn't know pureblood customs. Lucius does. This leads to problems. And sex, of course.