

A Taxing Affair

by richardgloucester

The Prime Minister needs money. It strikes him that he knows where there may be some to be found. Severus and Hermione join forces to thwart him and to protect Lucius Malfoy, who has the most to lose.

One

Chapter 1 of 12

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Author notes:

Disclaimer: I make no money from this. All characters and settings recognisable from the Potterverse belong to JK Rowling and, presumably, Warner Bros. However, the story is mine.

I would like to thank four people who have helped me greatly in writing this story: Shiv, who came up with the Prompt That Ran Away With Me; Machshefa, who squeed and demanded to know what was going to happen next; Annie Talbot, who helped greatly with the fine-tuning; and Camillo, who helped me come up with the thing that resolved the plot. Thank you, ladies.

A Taxing Affair chapter 1

Voldemort Plus Ten: 2008

The scene: the Prime Minister's private study, 10 Downing Street, London; the Ministry of Magic; the Leaky Cauldron.

The time: Tuesday, very late

The Prime Minister sat at his desk, gloomily trying to balance the books. He was aware that this was, strictly speaking, the Chancellor's job, but he was learning the hard way the disadvantages of appointing a buffoon to the post in an attempt to show how brilliant he himself had been at the job. He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Numbers were beginning to dance in front of his eyes.

He leaned back in his chair. Once upon a time, he had loved all those numbers. First there had been sums, the simple beauty of sums. Addition, subtraction, multiplication, and the near bliss of long division and fractions. Even the discovery of geometry and algebra had never taken the sparkle from a whole page of fractions. But the joys of geometry had brought him to the notion of maths in three dimensions, a tangible framework around which his mind could scramble like a monkey in a rain forest. Then there had been statistics, and suddenly the monkey could juggle. Finally had come the arcane Dark Art of economics, and his career was laid out before him.

When he had started, it had all looked so simple. Now he felt as though he was juggling fifteen balls in nine dimensions. One-handed. On a unicycle. Balanced on a rope

two hundred feet above a pit of lava.

He had to find money from somewhere, or he was dead and buried. More importantly, his political epitaph would be a joke.

What a shame he couldn't just conjure cash, like those wizard fellows. He opened a jaundiced eye and looked at the currently vacant old oil painting in the corner. It wasn't fair. They could even disappear when they wanted.

There was a discreet knock at the door.

"Come!" he called, wondering which of the staff was still awake at this time of night.

Ah. It would be him.

"Mr Snape, why are you still here?"

"A few things needed finishing, sir," he said, extracting some files from the teetering in-tray.

"You ought to be knighted, Mr Snape," the PM smiled wanly. "You are probably the only person in this whole establishment who *ever* finishes anything."

"I prefer to do without the publicity, sir," he said. "You should get some sleep. It's Questions tomorrow."

"Plenty of time for sleeping when I'm dead," was the PM's grim response. He picked up some papers but found himself regarding Snape instead.

Funny-looking man, he was. Always in that black three-piece suit, ruthlessly buttoned up summer or winter, with only a crisp white shirt and dark green tie to break the monotony. And that hair. What the hell was any man in his forties who wasn't a member of Status Quo doing with long hair? Granted, it was always severely tied back, but still... And the face. The PM had never seen anyone who looked quite that grim. Not even Putin on the day the American ambassador gave him a teddy bear. This Snape, all angles and hard lines, never seemed to raise his voice, but he always, *always*, got his way. The PM had privately nicknamed him "Ming the Merciless" for the way the undersecretaries and junior ministers scattered before him, and envied him the ability to command a perfectly made cup of tea whenever he wanted one. Even the nation's highest office didn't have that kind of influence.

And, oh! He'd never dare let on, but Ming had also become, in the PM's heart of hearts, "*Our* Mr Snape", the hero of heroes, for reducing the Home Secretary to tears with a simple raised eyebrow.

Snape was rapidly scanning the files he had chosen. He affixed a sticky note to each one, each with a scribbled remark: "Timewasting", "Poorly researched", "Bungler do again", "Interesting more information", "ff to MI6", and, with an exasperated hiss, "Bollocks".

"I'll deal with this last one personally," he said, "and see that the others don't reach your desk again until they are fit for use."

Nobody seemed to know exactly which department employed Mr Snape, but he had the highest of high security clearance. All the spy chiefs looked wise when the PM questioned them about it, which meant they didn't know either, in his experience. What was absolutely certain was that Snape was the only man in Britain who could hold his tongue. The PM had once accidentally on purpose let slip a very juicy piece of information to test Snape's discretion; not a hint of it had ever become known. He was the perfect aide.

"I sometimes think there's not a single aspect of this whole government that's fit for use," grumbled the PM. "But I appreciate the gesture. I don't suppose you have a hat from which you could pull several billion pounds, have you?" he continued hopefully, his eyes drifting involuntarily towards that empty frame.

"I fear I am no magician, sir. Such a trick would be quite beyond my capabilities," replied Snape.

"And if you could, I dare say you wouldn't be flunking round here. You'd be on a beach in the Bahamas with some prime totty, eh?" tried the PM, with heavy humour.

"Quite so, sir."

The PM watched the eyebrow, but it remained mercifully unraised.

"Ah, well." He turned his attention back to the mess on his desk.

"You really ought to sleep, sir."

"Impossible, with this on my mind. Thank you for your concern, Mr Snape, but you should take your own advice."

"Perhaps this might help you to relax."

Snape laid a slim book on top of the other papers and left. The PM picked it up and opened it curiously. His eyes flew to the door, which was just closing, and he half started out of his chair.

How had the man known?

Oh, what the hell the open page in front of him was a siren's song made manifest. He settled down again and picked up a pencil, starting on the first of many, many long fractions problems.

*

The person sitting at the Minister of Magic's paper-strewn desk was not the Minister of Magic. The Minister of Magic was at home in bed, belly full of his wife's wonderful but heavy cooking, feet cosy in warm and wonkily-knitted socks, and snoring loudly enough to shake dust from the rafters.

The person sitting at the Minister of Magic's desk had little in common with the Minister apart from the snoring, though in this case the snoring was quiet and rather cutely snuffly. This person was slumped in the large leather chair, stomach empty since a rushed canteen lunch had resulted in indigestion, and feet rather cold, as the fire in the office had gone out.

The person at the desk was, in theory, catching up with the Minister's workload. After the person's own tasks were satisfactorily completed, this was what had to be done in order to keep the Minister's cosseted and spreading backside in the aforementioned and very comfortable chair. The only reason why the person continued to do this was that the alternative candidates for the Minister's job ran the gamut from abominable to abysmal, and someone had to protect the world from them, thankless task though it was.

The person was so tired that she didn't stir when the grate flared briefly to verdant life and Severus Snape stepped through. He wasn't remotely surprised to find her there. He *was*, however, surprised that she was asleep. Normally, she would still be beaver away, fagged but fired with irritation at her boss, his minions, and the world in general. She would look up from the parchments with a smile usually the only smile he ever got in a day and quickly stack everything into a neat pile which she then carried through to her own desk in the office next door. She would skim through the notes he brought, ask him a few pertinent questions, thank him warmly and then grab her cloak and bag before heading home. Severus had become quite reliant on the routine a fact he noticed only now.

She was seated sideways in the great wing-back chair, her legs curled under her and her head tilted sideways against the leather. Her hair was screwed into the usual

graceless knot and she had managed to transfer some of the ink-stains from her fingers to her cheek. Since being placed in Downing Street, Severus had become addicted to Bic biro's what they lacked in style they certainly made up for in the associated lack of mess. Her quill had slipped from her fingers to the floor, and the papers that lay in her lap were in imminent danger of following it. Severus didn't bother resisting the urge to sneak a look at them as he removed them to safety. He snorted at the contents government was the same, no matter what part of the world was involved.

Since the person still didn't stir, Severus took it upon himself to stack the parchments. He then took out his sticky notes and pen and started the task of categorising. He'd used up "Bollocks", "Complete bollocks", "Utter bollocks" and "Unmitigated bollocks" when a sleepily amused voice caused him to look up.

"What comes next, then?"

"Potter's homework', usually," he replied. "Why aren't you Minister, Miss Granger? You do the job already."

"Too young, too Muggle, too female. They'd never vote me in," she said, taking her feet off the chair and sitting straight. "It's good to see you, Mr Snape. Sorry I was snoozing. Anything new from Number 10?"

"No. And I would never designate what you were doing as a mere 'snooze'."

"Oh, God. I wasn't dribbling, was I?"

"Not at all. How many late nights have you worked in a row this time, Miss Granger? And why does Weasley permit it?"

"Arthur.... Well, Arthur lets himself believe that things run quite well thanks to his habit of being nice, muffing his way through anything important, and never interfering with anything that actually might involve conflict," she said with more than a hint of sourness. "He's incredibly popular."

She repossessed her parchments.

"He will be delighted with the sticky notes."

Severus fished in his cloak pocket for a handful of biro's.

"Here give him some little coloured sticks to play with as well."

Hermione shot him a reproachful glance.

"Don't defend him to me, Miss Granger. He takes shameless advantage of your work ethic and makes you his attack dog so that he is shielded from all the hostility his position garners. I don't know why you do it."

He paused as she declined to answer.

"Very well, then I do know why: someone has to. Gryffindor," he jibed.

"Pots and kettles, Mr Spy Placed In The Muggle Government," responded Hermione. She got to her feet and swayed slightly.

"I need to eat and sleep," she announced. She rubbed at her eyes and straightened her crumpled robe. "And shower."

Severus checked the ornate clock on the wall.

"It's not too late to grab a bite at the Cauldron," he offered nonchalantly. "I haven't eaten, either," he added when she looked surprised.

*

So this time, when Hermione grabbed her cloak and bag, she broke with her usual routine. Instead of gulping a bowl of microwaved soup alone in her silent little flat before falling poleaxed into bed, she found herself sharing a huge bowl of stew, a flagon of the world's best bitter and a cosy corner of a noisy tavern with Severus Snape, of all people.

Not that she minded.

Ahem.

Snape had used his usual effortless anticharm to clear a path through the throng to the table he preferred, and once there, the high back of the settle shielding them from most curious eyes, they had fallen into easy conversation, bitching about the shortsightedness and ineptitude of government.

Hermione hadn't seen him for eight years following the end of the War, but once Arthur Weasley had secured the job of Minister and summoned her to be his aide, she had learned of Snape's role keeping an eye out for untoward uses of magic in the interstices of the Muggle administration. It was astonishing how far Voldemort had stretched his influence; less so how pernicious it was, and how difficult to remove.

"...and to be frank, the infiltration of the water authorities was rather inspired. I was quite tempted to leave the plans for the Westminster sewer systems in place."

Hermione laughed.

Snape had undone the tie round his hair so that it hung loose, the way she remembered from before the war, framing his face and shadowing the harsh planes. In the fuggy atmosphere of the pub, he had also gone so far as to loosen his tie and undo the top button of his shirt. He looked relaxed and absorbed as he conjured a piece of paper, took out another of those ubiquitous biro's and deftly sketched a complex organigram of the plot overlaying a diagram of the Victorian sewer systems, the two schematics matching completely.

"It's a bit... gothic," remarked Hermione, leaning in close to see better in the lamplight.

"Voldemort's fault," Snape replied as he added some final touches. "It was always a style thing with him and he had appalling taste."

He looked up, and Hermione realised how close they were. Picking up her tankard to conceal her sudden self-consciousness, she leaned back and smiled at him.

"This is... nice," she said.

"Such an inane piece of vocabulary, Miss Granger," he answered, raising the eyebrow.

But it held no terrors for her.

"Well, it *is* nice," she insisted. "Just talking. Just having a conversation, a real conversation..." She tailed off and looked into her beer, regretting having revealed something private. They had kept to impersonal topics by unspoken consent. He didn't need to know that she spent nearly every waking moment working, just to keep the backlog down to manageable proportions.

Snape was acting as though he hadn't noticed her error. It was chivalrous of him, since she knew very well he didn't miss a trick. He added a final touch to the organigram

and then sat back with his own beer. There was a slightly awkward silence, which stretched uncomfortably. Hermione was trying to think up a way of breaking it that didn't sound utterly gauche when she heard her name called.

"Oy! Mione!" came the shout again. It was Ron, with Harry in tow, both a little the worse for wear.

"Where have you been?" he asked, lurching up to the table. "Haven't seen you in ages!"

"*Her*-mi-o-neeee," said Harry, carefully negotiating the aspirant and each of the four syllables.

She put her beer down gently before standing to face them.

"I have been at work, as you very well know. I am always at work. My office is three floors up from the Auror section, with my name clearly marked on the door. Congratulations on your new daughter, Ron do give my best to Lavender and thank her for the card she sent me. Harry, say hi to Ginny. The Quidditch coaching must be keeping her really busy." She turned to Snape, who had also risen and was holding her cloak. "I'm ready to go home, now."

She opened her bag to pay her share of the meal, but Snape forestalled her.

"You can pay next time," he said, treating the boys to a confrontational glare. They goggled when he put the cloak round her shoulders and stood aside to let her leave first.

Outside the pub, Hermione looked anywhere but at Snape's face. "Thank you!" she said, too brightly.

"I meant it, you know."

"What?" she asked, puzzled.

"You owe me dinner."

He wandered off a few paces before Apparating away. Hermione looked at the spot for a few moments before turning and disappearing herself.

"You're on," she murmured quietly when she arrived home.

*

Back at Number 10, the PM was still up. He had found Mr Snape's gift remarkably cheering. After a couple of pages, he was so deep into the swing of fractions that the majority of his brain was relaxed and free enough to think. Magicians pulling things out of hats.... The frame was still unoccupied when he glanced at it. Magicians.... Magi....

All of a sudden, he bounded out of his chair and through the door. He startled the policemen stationed outside as he shot past them to Number 11. Shoving the key enthusiastically into the lock he had kept one, just in case he stepped into the hallway and made his way to the offices that held the most confidential records. The security men on duty let him pass without question.

It was a potentially profitable night's work, he thought, as he appeared in the House for Prime Minister's Questions, showered, shaved, and definitely not rested. He stepped up to the dispatch box and gave the performance of his life.

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Author Notes:

1.Number 11, Downing Street, is the official residence of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Britain's finance minister.

2.Prime Minister's Questions takes place in the House of Commons on Wednesdays while Parliament is in session. For a period of half an hour, the Prime Minister answers any questions the rest of the Members of Parliament care to fire at him. While doing this, he stands at the

3.Dispatch box. Basically, there are two of these in the House of Commons, placed on the table which divides the House. The important officials of each major party use them as lecterns when speaking in the House.

Two

Chapter 2 of 12

The Prime Minister needs money. It strikes him that he knows where there may be some to be found. Severus and Hermione join forces to thwart him and to protect Lucius Malfoy, who has the most to lose.

Voldemort Plus 10: 2008

The Place: Malfoy Manor, Ministry of Magic, 10 Downing Street

The Time: Breakfast time, Wednesday

Lucius stood at the window of the smaller breakfast parlour, cradling a cup of Lapsang Souchong in his long fingers and inhaling the smoky fragrance. The remnants of his breakfast were scattered across the impeccable linen of the tablecloth, along with the *Daily Prophet*, which he had as usual skimmed, sneered at, and tossed aside. He was currently indulging in the guilty pleasure of the *Times* cryptic crossword, despite the frustration of having to keep the answers in his head. The shoddy blotting paper it was printed on spread the ink too much to let him fill it in.

It was a perfect early autumn morning. The sun was taking the chill off the air, birds were singing, light was sparkling on the ornamental ponds, and one of the peacocks added a perfect accent to the smooth expanse of lawn. He winced as it shrieked. He'd only ever kept them to annoy Narcissa the pinched look she got when they screeched or crapped on the terraces was most entertaining but now she was gone he found they annoyed him just as much.

He sighed. What to do? What to do? It was all very well being rich enough to do whatever he wanted without reflection, but being spoilt for choice had spoiled him for choosing. He was not in the mood for reviewing his investments and other business projects, none of his usual hobbies held any appeal, he wasn't allowed to crush any minions these days (especially with the introduction of Elf unions), and Draco, spending a year or two on the Magic faculty at Harvard while overseeing the spread of the Malfoy empire in the Americas, was unavailable for either argument or condescension. Time was, he would have donned his cloak, picked up his cane, and gone to London to stir up a little excitement at the Ministry or the club, but ever since the War, Lucius Malfoy had been *persona non grata*. True, he had been able to present evidence that during the Dark Lord's final year he had leaked as much information as he dared to the Order, but as far as social acceptance was concerned, fence-sitting cut no mustard.

Bored, bored, bored. He contemplated Narcissa's empty place at the table, imagining a willowy redhead or lush black-haired beauty there, but in his extensive experience, such women came with a retinue of shrill voices, demands, stupid but plentiful conversation, and shoes. Endless bloody shoes. He was still finding them after seven years, and was convinced that Narcissa had Charmed the house to keep producing them. When it came to being irritating, her magic could be very inventive, at times.

He looked at the crossword again and found he had lost his thread. With a snarl that might have been familiar to Harry Potter in his second-worst nightmares, Lucius threw the newspaper into the fireplace and sent his cup crashing after it.

And where the bloody hell had Severus been yesterday evening? They always played chess on Tuesday evenings, no matter how late.

He clicked his fingers for the dogs and stalked out to the stables.

*

"Good morning, Miss Granger!" said Arthur Weasley, Order of Merlin Second Class, and Minister for Magic.

"Good morning, sir," said Hermione, bracing herself for the oncoming bear hug. This was Arthur's way of compromising between being her boss and being her surrogate dad.

For once, she didn't really mind. She had had an unexpectedly good night's sleep rather than a tumble into black oblivion; she had spent a highly enjoyable couple of hours with someone whose company she had long wanted to enjoy; he had been, in his own taciturn way, quite kind; he apparently wanted to see her again; and she had arrived in her office that morning to find a bouquet of flowers from Ron, a box of Honeyduke's chocolates from Harry, and an invitation from both of them to go out on Saturday night. Presumably, their perception that she was desperate enough to socialise with Snape had tickled their consciences.

"So what do we have on our plates today?" enquired Arthur, gesturing humorously with the plate of buttered toast whose consumption her arrival had interrupted.

Hermione went to his desk and opened the enormous diary that lay there.

"Revelio," she commanded, and the list of meetings and engagements seeped into visibility for her eyes and hers alone. Security measures were still tight, ten years on.

"Full session of the Wizengamot at ten, to discuss... let me see..." She consulted her own notebook. "...pensions, new legislation on the use of time-turners, policy concerning prisoners' parole, licensing of certain new potions and charms..."

"Yes, yes," said Arthur. "What else?"

Hermione sighed. Arthur would go in and wing it, as usual. He did that very well indeed, paying close attention to all the arguments, engineering some sort of compromise that left nobody satisfied but him looking good and fair-minded, and sauntering off to the next appointment. It was her job to tie up the loose ends.

"Lunch with the Department Heads, followed by planning for the Year Ten ball, and then the half-yearly budget meeting, which will probably run over, so you'd better let Molly know you might be late."

Arthur looked shiftily.

Hermione sighed again. She knew very well that the budget meeting with its attendant arguments and headaches would be dumped on her. He would be called away to look at some misused Muggle artefact or other that absolutely *had* to have his attention, and somehow neglect to come back.

She popped into her office for the files she had been working on the previous night. It made her smile to see all the rude inscriptions on the sticky notes.

As predicted, Arthur was delighted with them, and even more so with the biros. Hermione had to clear up the mess after an *Engorgio* and a Dismantling Charm released a large splat of sticky ink. Helpless bloody men.

Finally, she forced Arthur to pay attention and the day's work began.

*

At Number Ten, Downing Street, Severus went about his work cheerfully at first. Miss Granger had smiled at him. She had talked to him. She had shared dinner with him. She had laughed with him. She had accepted his help.

Even as he focused on the pages of the folder he had appropriated from the PM's desk, he remembered how Miss Granger's hair had tickled his cheek when she bent to look at his sketch.

Damn this was going to be complicated. Far from being the "bollocks" he had marked it with, the folder a proposal for changes to the funding procedures of the armed forces was a very subtle piece of sabotage that had "Voldemort" stamped all over it.

She came out with me.

He would have to ferret out the lines of communication behind this document.

She was probably just hungry.

Usually, there would be one or two junior clerical staff who had been *Imperio'd* to insert some subtle twists into the statistics.

She'd have gone with anyone. She said herself she was starved of conversation.

Although this looked more like the work of one of the highly-placed Squibs who had proved so difficult to track down.

She could have dealt with Potter and Weasley with or without my intervention.

So first things first, he'd better contact the MoD to find out exactly who was responsible for preparing the figures.

She didn't say whether she would come out again.

And there were probably some visits to be paid to the various Quartermasters' departments.

She's a former student twenty years younger than me who probably still superimposes that bloody teaching robe every time she sees me.

So he would have to get some of the Dept. of Mysteries staff and a few of the cleverer Aurors (that ruled out Potter and Weasley) to do the leg-work which would need careful planning as he couldn't be out of Number 10 too much.

Fuck she made me forget Lucius!

Severus thrust the file away from him and pushed back from the desk. He couldn't concentrate! Bloody Granger girl, interfering with his work!

And where the hell is my cup of tea?!

He left the room, forgetting to cancel the subtle misdirection charm he habitually set on his office door when he wanted to be undisturbed.

*

He was in such a bad temper that he risked Disapparating within Number 10 itself. There was a quiet corner under the stairs which could be used when nobody was passing through, and one little crack wouldn't cause much excitement.

The wards at the Manor usually let Severus pass without a problem, but it seemed that he was in deep disgrace, which was why he found himself teetering on the edge of a bramble-lined ditch running along the side of an obscure country lane. This was the public face of Malfoy Manor. It was really very good. He scribbled a note on a piece of paper, folded it, and sent the little aeroplane to find a way through.

Twenty minutes later, a small lych-gate grudgingly inched its way into existence amongst the brambles. Evidently, Lucius was sulking, but amenable to placation. Severus still got rather badly scratched, but there were some fat and juicy blackberries in compensation. He Transfigured a twig into a basket and busied himself with the collection of fruit while he waited for the master to appear. When Lucius was in a snit it was never wise, even for friends, to go far onto the Malfoy land without express permission.

"Scrumpling, Severus?" Lucius' voice came from above. Severus turned unhurriedly, concealing his start of surprise.

"Have you taught that horse to tiptoe?" He adopted a tone of amusement.

"Elementary magic, dear boy. Though I wouldn't expect *you* to know a Charm when you see it."

Oh, dear. It was one of those days.

"And what persuades you to grace me with some of your precious time today, Mr Snape? Are you adding skiving to your list of schoolboy misdemeanours, now that you are so much a part of the Muggle world that you forget your obligations in this one?"

"Lucius," said Snape evenly, "I came to apologise. Something came up."

"Then you shall tell me all about it." He turned the horse's head and kicked it into a canter. "Up at the house," he threw back over his shoulder.

Severus frowned. If he didn't know very well how much Lucius relied on him these days, he would be sorely tempted to pay him back for such rudeness. However, he did know it. And in any case, it was a pleasant walk up to the Manor and would give the master time to change and wash off the stink of horse before Severus' delicate proboscis had to come too close. He Summoned a load more blackberries into his basket so he could munch them on the way and still have enough to give to the kitchen elves for a pie, and set off, enjoying the warm autumn day. He usually came in via the manicured front lawns, but he much preferred the artistically "wild" landscape on this side.

A forty-minute amble brought him to the point where the woods opened up to a vista of wide, sloping lawns where an occasional ancient and stately tree stood sentinel over the Manor itself. "Manor" was actually a bit of a misnomer, if truth be told. It was a little more discreet than Chatsworth, but not by much. It was such a perfect day that the elegant façade was seamlessly reflected in the ornamental ponds, accented by lilies and the occasional flicker of koi carp undulating beneath the surface. He wasn't sure he cared for the grace note of two wolfhounds munching on the bloody carcass of a decidedly ex-peacock, but it *was* a very Malfoyesque touch.

Lucius must have hurried. He was pacing peevishly when Severus found him in the library. The chess board and decanter were set up as they always were for Tuesday evenings, and Severus felt a fresh pang of guilt at the sight. Really, Lucius might be an arrogant git at times, but he was an arrogant git starved of company, and just about the only person who ever actually talked to him like a normal human being.

Apart from one....

"Do sit down, my friend," said Lucius with studied courtesy. "May I offer you a drink? Or is it too early? Tea, then?"

"I'll have the tea, thanks," replied Severus, dredging up the nearly-forgotten remains of his Yorkshire accent in riposte. "But don't bother getting all hoity-toity with me. I came to say sorry as soon as I realised I'd stood you up." He flopped inelegantly into an armchair and stuck his legs out.

Lucius' lip twitched.

"Very well, Severus. Much though I adore your music-hall northerner act, I believe you may desist. On condition that you tell me *all* about what kept you away from my riveting society."

He rang for tea and then proceeded to wring more from his friend than his friend really wanted wrung.

How interesting, he thought after Snape took his leave. *Severus has quite a tendre for the Granger girl. More, perhaps, than he realises...* He laughed out loud. The Granger girl. He had some clear memories of her from the War and its aftermath, and was interested to hear that she had grown into a woman who might even be worthy of... He laughed again.

*

Downing Street was in uproar when Severus returned. Apparently, a gunshot had been heard. "Actually *inside* Number 10!" an anxious secretary squeaked to him, clinging to his arm until an expressionless black stare made her remember to whom she was speaking and the whole building had been turned upside down by armed and armoured policemen and SAS troopers for three hours before they decided it had been a mistake. Passing a loud argument that was taking place between the head of the household staff and the police commander about damage to government property, he made a mental note to *not* Apparate within earshot of any Muggles again. And where the bloody hell had his office gone?

"Ah. Mr Snape," came the PM's unusually jovial voice, interrupting his search. "There you are! Come with me, would you? I have an idea I want to run by someone I can trust."

Bulling his way past a bevy of civil servants and giving them hearty reassurances which nobody believed, the PM ushered Severus into his office, locking the door behind them. He saw the look of surprise.

"Don't worry!" he said. "Don't worry! It's just to make sure we aren't disturbed."

The man was fairly humming with excitement. It was unnerving. He was usually the very soul of gloom.

"Don't you think the staff will be more worried if they can't get to you?"

"Never mind that. Sit down. No come over here!"

He led Severus over to the far corner of the room and caused him to stand in front of the small, dingy portrait of a toad-like individual in an unflattering long wig.

"What do you think of that, eh?"

Severus, with a very bad feeling burgeoning inside him, affected mild puzzlement.

"It's probably late seventeenth-century, looks like one of the minor English artists. The brush-work is fine, but the painting is badly in need of cleaning. Why, Prime Minister? Are you thinking of having it sold?" He turned away from the picture. "I shouldn't think you'll get much for this, except maybe from some fan of the grotesque."

"Look again tell me if you see anything unusual."

Snape obeyed, catching the tail end of an 'I'll get you for that' expression on the little man's face. He pretended to examine the painting again, all the while trying his very hardest to make Legilimency work on oil paint. It didn't. But the expression of suppressed anxiety was clear. Snape sympathised. He was beginning to feel like a dyspeptic frog himself.

"Nothing, sir."

"What if I were to tell you that that frame was empty last night?" the PM was almost bouncing. Severus had to shake the image of a shimmying bloodhound from his mind.

"I would probably put it down to bad light and overwork, Prime Minister. Perhaps you should take a little time off."

"No! No!"

The PM took a calming breath.

"Mr Snape, I am about to tell you something which is usually only revealed to the incumbent Prime Minister of this land. Something you may find very difficult, at first, to accept."

He paused, dramatically.

"Magic is real. There are real witches and wizards living in Great Britain today!"

Snape feigned incredulity. The PM, encouraged by the fact that both eyebrows had climbed, not just the one, said, "Do you want me to prove it?" And with that, he spun and shouted "BOO!" right in the face of the portrait, which flinched and squeaked, then looked abashedly at Snape, who was stony-faced.

"What do you think of that, then?" the PM exclaimed triumphantly.

Snape took the picture from the wall and examined it, as if looking for trickery.

It's clever, I'll give you that," he said grimly. "But I'm not convinced that it proves the existence of a whole magical counter-culture."

"Well, I *will* prove it to you in a day or two, Mr Snape I will."

"Oh? And how, sir?"

"Don't consign me to the loony bin just yet. Wait until Friday evening. My opposite number will be paying us a visit."

"And what significance, if any, sir, does all of this jiggery-pokery have for the job we have in hand which is running the country?"

Even blatant disrespect couldn't burst the PM's bubble.

"Well keep all this strictly to yourself for the moment, for God's sake but your little book of sums last night gave me a chance to think, and to put together some of the information I have now as PM with some of the information I had as Chancellor. There's a whole section of society out there that nobody knows anything about, and I've checked the records..." His voice dropped portentously as he continued:

"And they have *never... been... taxed!*"

*

Author Note:

Chatsworth House, in Derbyshire, is the home of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire. It is big.

<http://www.chatsworth.org/>

Three

Chapter 3 of 12

The Prime Minister needs money. It strikes him that he knows where there may be some to be found. Severus and Hermione join forces to thwart him and to protect Lucius Malfoy, who has the most to lose.

Voldemort Plus Ten: 2008

The place: the Ministry; Number Ten; Hermione's flat

The time: Wednesday evening to Friday evening

The day went exactly as Hermione had predicted, and Arthur was just making his getaway through the Floo as she returned to his office with a pile of paperwork and a migraine from the budget meeting. Well, at least she was saved the bother of trying to make him pay attention while she went through the reams of financial stuff that she herself hated with a passion. After several hours of mediating between the bickering and whinging Department Heads and their minions, she had finally lost her temper, put her foot down and baldly given each of them a percentage, telling them all to shut up and be happy that they had got anything at all. She was sorely tempted to consign every last one of them, and their paperwork, to the everlasting fires of whichever Underworld applied. And there would be consequences, she knew, when they all came sneaking up to Arthur to extract promises of more money when her back was turned.

Still, it could wait until another day. She had a backlog of other business to deal with. And before that, she needed a Headache Potion, a quick wash, and about a pint of tea.

She descended three levels to the Auror section, letting herself into the duelling halls, where there were showers. It was past seven, so there were few people about to see her nip into one of the halls to let off steam with a wide selection of especially nasty hexes. She stopped short of any Unforgiveables, but the practice mannequin was in tatters by the time she had finished. A final "Reducto" ensured that the Auror trainees would have dust enough to make every one of them sneeze for the next week.

She showered, did her best to make her hair presentable, shook some of the wrinkles from her clothes, and returned to the office to wait... Strike that. To work. That was it. To work. Not to settle into one of the big armchairs by the fire with a lapful of folders which presented absolutely no distraction whatsoever from the vigil she kept.

Hermione wasn't used to feeling like this. Men had been an occasional pastime over the past ten years, but none of them had ever managed to turn her attention away from what was actually important. She even caught herself wishing she kept some make-up in her desk. She was sure to be looking hag-ridden... Damn! She was behaving like a... like a *girl*! Just because the man she'd fancied in secret since the day she started this job and he walked into her office and left her gaping like an imbecile had finally, finally spoken to her like a human being. Ridiculous behaviour. And why in Circe's name wasn't he here yet?

As if on cue, Snape burst through the Floo. But instead of responding to her greeting, he made a beeline for Arthur's best scotch and downed a good two fingers before he even looked at her.

"You'd better pour me one of those, too," said Hermione, swallowing her disappointment. "It looks as though I'm going to need it."

She was deprived of the electric moment when their fingers brushed as he handed her the glass by the simple fact that they didn't. And where can a girl find a romantic cliché these days when she needs one? thought Hermione. She settled for watching his grim expression relax almost imperceptibly as he sank into the other armchair and held his glass to his forehead above closed eyes.

"So?" she prompted. "Are you going to tell me, or am I going to get sloshed just for the hell of it?"

*

It would be fair to say that Hermione was horrified by Snape's news.

"But... but he *can't* do that!" she protested. "That goes against the Accords! He *can't*!" she repeated.

"I think you'll find that he probably can," Severus sighed into his whisky. Sharing the bad news had drained much of the tension that he had been forced to bottle up all day while pretending to be a useful little Muggle round Downing Street. "Miss Granger, it doesn't surprise me to learn that you know of the Accords, but I expect you are one of very few who do, these days. It was an oral agreement, an arrangement between gentlemen, sealed with a handshake, and the only magic involved was that of trust."

"Which has now been breached "

"I wouldn't go that far," he replied, watching her indignant expression. "The PM probably knows nothing about it such information can get lost with time. And even if he did know, he's desperate enough to ignore a centuries-old bargain. His party, his position and his legacy are on the line."

"But why didn't you...? No, forget it you can't blow your cover. What are we going to do?"

"You're going to have to prime Arthur for the meeting on Friday..."

"What?! What meeting on Friday?" Hermione thrust herself out of her chair and rubbed at her temples. "Damn Arthur! Damn him he just buggered off home without even telling me! Matthew! Matthew Jobberknoll!" she shouted at a small and currently empty frame on the wall near the Minister's desk.

The frog-like man sidled into view.

"What's been going on?" demanded Hermione.

"Oh, don't *you* start," he complained. "I've had Snape glaring at me all day oh, there you are again, what a joy you are to behold, you with your impeccable taste in art " Severus scowled.

"and that not-nearly-stupid-enough Muggle giving me the third degree..."

"Just tell me, Matthew. Please."

Matthew looked lugubriously at Hermione's glass.

"I remember whisky," he said. "Nobody thought to paint me any. Oh, all right! It was after lunch. The Muggle had me badger the Minister into a meeting, but he didn't say what it was about..."

"No, he really isn't stupid, is he?" Hermione interrupted, looking at Severus.

"Whereas Arthur is quite capable of being imbecilic enough for the two of them," he replied.

"Thank you, Matthew," said Hermione to the portrait. "Look if I can get you access to the picture of Bacchus and his drunken nymphs in the canteen, would you promise to keep me informed in future?"

"It's against protocol!" protested Matthew without any conviction at all.

"Protocol be damned. You were painted in, what? 1698? I think three centuries of faithful service deserves a little reward, don't you?"

"Then protocol be damned, indeed, Miss Granger. I am your most..." He paused for a quick glance behind her and a secretive smirk that made him more frog-like than ever. "...*almost* your most faithful servant!" And with that he disappeared.

"What did he mean?" Hermione demanded of Severus, who turned away and resumed his chair at the fireside.

"No idea. Now listen, you need to prime Arthur for the meeting, and you need to have anything you can find about the Accords at your fingertips so you can prompt him you need to make *sure* he brings you along so he doesn't get bamboozled."

Hermione thought of her already enormous pile of work. She consulted the Minister's diary.

"I'll need to search the archives for any documentary evidence of the Accords. I'll just have to cancel as many meetings as I can and work late. *Later*. Is there any chance you can help me? It's an awful lot of old parchment to sift through."

"Enticing as the idea of coughing and sneezing my way through three centuries of records may be, Miss Granger...", replied Severus, but, noticing her look of reproach and the resigned slump to her shoulders, he backtracked. "...I think we might postpone it to tomorrow evening. For now, though, we must plan our line of attack so you can get going on Weasley."

"Oh, Merlin. It's going to be horrible. He always improvises. He's not going to be able to this time, is he?"

Severus raised his glass to her.

"To perseverance."

She acknowledged the toast and took a mouthful of her own drink. The alcohol bounced off her stomach and went straight to her head.

"Not on an empty stomach!" she gasped. "Look..." She hesitated. "Um..."

He raised the eyebrow.

She fiddled with her glass but then firmed her jaw and rushed on.

"I owe you a meal. Why don't we grab a take-away and go back to my place? I've got a nice bottle of wine and there's no danger of being overheard..." Her courage petered out under his expressionless stare.

Oh, no! More awkward silences and now he thinks I'm a complete tart and he'll never speak to me again and...

"Indian or Chinese?" he said.

She wasn't to know, as they left the Minister's office, that the Inner Severus was behaving like the man who won the Cup Final with a goal in the last minute of extra time.

*

At seven o'clock on Friday evening, the Minister for Magic stepped through the Floo connection to the Prime Minister's office in Downing Street. He was closely followed by a young woman in smart navy blue robes. She was carrying a briefcase and had a determined expression that spelled trouble. Snape was concealing his surprise very well, thought the PM.

The two Ministers shook hands.

"And this is my right hand, Hermione Granger," said Arthur in an avuncular fashion that brought a brief look of irritation to her face.

"Ms Granger." The PM extended one of his great paws and engulfed her outstretched hand. Her grip was firm and she didn't look one whit impressed by him. Trouble indeed.

He presented Snape as his aide and then everybody sat down.

Weasley was clearly fascinated by everything in the office, and his secretary had to literally prod him to pay attention when the PM cleared his throat. She herself was obviously not going to miss a word or a nuance. She was ready and waiting with a notepad and a quill—an actual, honest-to-goodness *quill pen*—before her on the table and a slim sheaf of papers next to them.

"Now, Minister, I expect you know why I requested this meeting."

"Well, actually," Weasley joshed, "I think I might have an inkling!"

"It's a slightly delicate matter, but I think that perhaps the easiest thing would be to approach it without any beating about the bush."

"Absolutely!" Weasley encouraged him.

"Well, to put it bluntly, Minister, your people don't pay tax. They are citizens of this country but not contributors. I am going to have to change that." He leaned forward on his arms, wearing a serious-bulldog look.

Ms Granger opened her folder.

"Now, Prime Minister, I don't know if you are aware of it or not, but the wizarding community has a negligible impact on the Muggle economy," said Weasley. He took the piece of parchment that Ms Granger passed to him. "You will see that we have our own health care provision, schools, prisons, power, communications, transport..." He passed the parchment across the table.

"Your people enjoy the benefits of citizenship, of diplomatic protection, when abroad."

"Actually, we deal with that, too."

"Your houses and communities occupy land on which no charges have ever been levied."

The PM noted that Ms Granger frowned at that; she was quick—she'd spotted that he was intending to backdate the taxes.

"But then there is the strength of precedent against you, Prime Minister," said Weasley seriously.

"And yet precedent can, has been, and in this case *must* be broken. The country needs funds."

"Minister, if I may?" asked Ms Granger.

"Go ahead, Hermione."

Clearly she was more than just a secretary.

"Prime Minister, you may or may not be aware that the reason why most Muggles do not suspect the existence of our world is the passing of the International Statute of

Wizarding Secrecy in 1692, which ensured the separation of our two communities for the safety and peace of mind of both."

The PM nodded, encouraging her to proceed.

"Conjunct to the Statute, there was a local agreement between the then Mugwump and the British crown, ensuring free tenure in perpetuity of all lands pertaining to the wizarding community in return for services rendered protecting the general public from the more dangerous manifestations of the magical world, such as dragons, giants, invidious smaller fauna, aggressive flora, Dark magic, and so on. This agreement was known as the Maiden Castle Accords. It was witnessed by representatives of all the sentient and peaceful magical species, as well as by the King's most trusted ministers. We do pay tax, sir we pay in kind."

Although the PM was having some trouble swallowing a few of the concepts the young woman was throwing around so casually, such as "aggressive flora", he wasn't about to be distracted from his goal.

"I'm afraid I have never heard of these 'Accords'," he said too genially.

"It was an oral agreement," said Ms Granger a touch defiantly, as if she knew what he would make of that.

It was true that a part of him squirmed at overturning dearly-held traditions, but money was money, and you didn't get to be PM by being squeamish. His "Ah" in response was the very embodiment of satisfaction.

"But," she continued, "you will be perfectly well aware that some of the most cherished cornerstones of British common law, such as the right to trial by jury, were not in fact enshrined in statute. Nevertheless, to satisfy you that we are telling the truth, I have found a certain amount of archive material which refers specifically to the Accords and their nature..."

"Thank you, Ms Granger," said the PM, holding out his hand for her documentation. "I believe the Minister and I can take it from here."

He couldn't fail to see the slightly panicky look she gave her boss.

"Mr Snape, perhaps you would be so kind as to give Ms Granger the tour of Number 10. Now, Mr Weasley..."

"Minister!" the Granger woman insisted, but to no avail.

"I'll see you back in my office in a little while, Hermione," said the Minister for Magic.

*

On the wrong side of the PM's office door, Hermione clenched her hands into fists.

"That's it, then."

"Indeed it would seem to be," replied Snape grimly.

"I don't suppose we could have expected anything else, really."

"You *did* make sure he had all the arguments at his fingertips?"

"Oh, give me some credit! The amount of talking I've done over the past two days, he must have thought Molly was the epitome of silence when he got home! But Arthur's a 'big picture' man you know that."

"Whereas the PM is a 'details' man and will produce such a swarm of them that Arthur will be backed into a corner and find himself ~~somehow~~ agreeing."

"I just hope he doesn't give in to *everything*..."

Snape snorted.

"Well, do you want to see Number 10, then?" he asked.

"I couldn't give a monkey's about Number 10. Let's go and see if Arthur has anything other than whisky in his cupboard. I hate whisky."

*

Hermione and Severus had spent a pleasant evening in her flat on the Wednesday. They analysed the potential disaster looming ahead of them, argued over the best approach to take with Arthur, and discussed the ramifications for the wizarding community if and when Arthur caved. They ate an adequate Chinese take-away meal, lingered over a bottle of chardonnay, and talked about books. He took off his tie; she changed from shoes into a comfortable pair of slippers. They progressed from "Mr Snape" and "Miss Granger" to not calling each other anything at all. When the time came for him to leave, they both said "um" a few times. They shook hands, a little awkwardly.

Hermione, wishing she had had the confidence in her own meagre attractions to rise on tiptoe and lightly brush his cheek with her lips a clear but unthreatening invitation to more... intimate... intimacies, leaned on the inside of the door she had closed against his parting, running the evening through her mind the sound of his voice, how he lost some of his reserve as he became absorbed in conversation, the irresistible enigma of his dark eyes. She was overjoyed to find that he had left his tie behind on the sofa. The silk felt wonderful against her skin.

For his part, Severus put the hand she had clasped into his pocket and found himself on the verge of swearing he would never wash it again. He snorted, ridiculing himself for acting like a lovesick schoolboy at his age, but allowed himself the pleasure of dwelling on the memory of her expressive face, the unruly tendrils of hair that escaped from the clip she wore, the freedom of her laughter, and the amazing evidence of her actually seeming to enjoy his company.

None of which was on show in the Ministry archives on Thursday evening. There was a fair amount of surreptitious glancing, and the odd "Aha!" when one of them tracked down some brief mention of the Accords, but they worked more or less in silence, parting in the early hours of the morning after the most negligible of exhausted farewells. He did not know how much she appreciated having someone willing to share the burden of the academic legwork; she was not aware that her oversight in somehow neglecting to return his tie gave him an unaccustomed feeling of optimism.

Yet it felt completely natural to both of them to make a joint raid on Arthur's stash of Muggle drinks and settle in together to await him with a bottle of forty-year-old Armagnac and a game of backgammon.

By unspoken consent, they steered clear of speculation about what was happening elsewhere in London.

*

"How bad is it, then?" demanded Severus from the depths of his armchair when Arthur eventually stumbled through the Floo.

Arthur shoved the backgammon set to one side and sat down heavily on the low table, which creaked. He rubbed his face with both hands.

"Well, it could be worse," he began, looking at the carpet.

"In what way worse, Minister?" asked Hermione neutrally from under the soft, thick blanket Severus had conjured for her when she dozed off.

Arthur winced.

"Erm. Well. He's going to give us some time to get organised, and..."

"How generous," Snape commented.

"...and he's going to start with the richest first, to demonstrate to the whole wizarding population that it's fair and equitable."

"Fair. And equitable," said Hermione. "Ah."

"Just as a matter of interest, Weasley," asked Snape, "you *do* know who the richest wizard in Britain is don't you?"

There was a brief pause and then Arthur looked up, horrified.

"You're about to go up against Lucius Malfoy, Weasley. And he's not in a very forgiving mood these days."

Hermione took pity on Arthur.

"Go home. Get some rest. In fact, get a lot of rest this weekend, Arthur. And on Monday, when you come into the office, you *are* going to listen to me, you *are* going to pay very close attention, and you *are* going to do exactly as you're told."

Arthur nodded meekly.

*

But for the ticking of the grandfather clock and the crackle of the fire, the Minister's office was silent. Hermione leaned her head back and drew the blanket more closely about her as she watched the flames through heavy-lidded eyes. Severus stretched out his legs, putting his feet on the table. He leafed through the folder of demands and instructions that Arthur had dropped on the floor.

Eventually, Hermione gave a great sigh and stirred.

"Give that to me. I'd better go and get some sleep myself, as I'm going to have to spend the entire weekend on the internet, trying to get my head round British tax rules."

"Shall I help?"

She smiled at him.

"I think you're going to have your work cut out preparing Mr Malfoy for the worst. I'll do my best to find what loopholes I can, but just in case, let's try and avoid total meltdown."

*

Four

Chapter 4 of 12

The Prime Minister needs money. It strikes him that he knows where there may be some to be found. Severus and Hermione join forces to thwart him and to protect Lucius Malfoy, who has the most to lose.

Voldemort Plus Ten: 2008

The place: Hermione's flat, out and about in London

The time: Saturday

It wasn't the best way to spend a Saturday.

Hermione got up at nine, showered, slung on jogging trousers, a t-shirt, thick socks and her slippers, made the first of many cups of coffee, and set to work trying to understand tax.

Tax in the wizarding world tended to be fairly simple one paid a percentage of one's income. Businesses paid a percentage of profit. The amounts were calculated from the paperwork provided by the goblins at Gringotts, and everybody banked with them. Naturally, everybody who could be bothered to cheat did so, but as long as the Ministry had enough funds to do what needed doing, the system (with its concomitant of bungs, bribes and old-boy-networking) worked just fine.

But this... This stuff was Byzantine.

By two o'clock her head was ready to explode, and all the coffee was giving her indigestion. She swapped slippers for trainers and nipped out to the local corner shop to lay in supplies of bread, Marmite, apples (on the grounds that a girl needed to have a vitamin now and again), and three of Heinz' best Emergency Steamed Puddings two chocolate and one spotted dick, with a carton of custard to make it go down better.

By six, she was cross-eyed and very thankful when her alarm went off, reminding her she had an hour to get ready before she was supposed to meet the boys.

Looking at her reflection, she decided that Hermione Granger scrubbed up really rather well. The little black dress showed off her curves, the moderately high heels of her shoes made her ankles look pretty, tamed and piled hair allowed her to show off her favourite Venetian glass earrings, and a spot of make-up did wonders for her eyes and lips. She twirled. Shame this was just for Harry and Ron, really. Oh, well.

They had arranged to meet at a wine bar in Muggle London before going on for a meal. It was in a crowded and well-lit area, so Hermione was obliged to take Muggle transport. She arrived a little late, to find her friends and their wives cosily ensconced on the two bench seats at the table they had chosen, leaving a small stool for her to perch on. She hugged the boys and Ginny, air-kissed with Lavender, and duly perched, not without resentment. She'd been hoping for it to be just the three of them which had probably been unreasonable of her. Ron went to fetch her a drink.

"You look fantastic, Lavender!" she said. "I'm amazed you've got your figure back already!"

"It's not that difficult, with the right techniques," said Lavender. "And Molly's such a dear, taking the children so I can spend some time looking after myself. Ron really appreciates it when I look my best, you know."

Oh, bloody hell, thought Hermione. *It's going to be an 'I'm a real woman and you're not' session* She smiled brightly as Ron handed her a glass of a wine whose only redeeming feature was that it gave her an excuse to turn her attention away from Lavender.

"And Ginny! How lovely to see you after so long! How are the children? And the job?"

Ginny also looked fantastic, but as she spent her life coaching sports and her youngest child was four years old rather than three months, this was hardly surprising.

Baby talk ensued. Hermione assumed that one's own children would be interesting once one had them, but struggled to find anything that sounded remotely genuine to say about other people's. She felt as if she was drowning in a sea of her own indifference. Harry and Ron, revelling in proud paternity, astonished her.

Eventually, they turned to Ministry chatter. She was hampered by not being allowed to talk in much detail about her work, and by the fact that she didn't really feel able to roundly abuse her boss in the face of two of his children. Harry and Ron slipped automatically into Auror-specific topics, which were interesting but often excluded her. She was also finding it rather annoying trying to hold a conversation with Ginny and Lavender talking across the middle of it. Then something Lavender said caught her attention.

"You're writing a book?"

"It's not *that* surprising, Hermione," snapped Lavender.

"I didn't mean..."

"Molly and I are putting together a modern compendium of domestic and personal care charms," she continued a trifle defensively.

"Oh, but that's wonderful!" said Hermione with real enthusiasm. "You were always really creative with beauty stuff at school just look at you now! and Molly's a genius in the kitchen...."

"But I wouldn't expect *you* to waste much of your precious time on such housewifely stuff," Lavender said with sudden animosity. "Seeing as you're so busy running the world."

"Lavender!" exclaimed the other three.

There was an embarrassed silence.

"Actually, I was about to say that it's just the sort of thing I could really do with," said Hermione.

"Lav'll send you a copy as soon as it's published won't you, sweet?" said Ron.

"Yes, of course. Hermione, I'm..."

"It doesn't matter, Lavender. Just a misunderstanding. Anyway, tell me when you expect to see it in print."

Feeling a little envious, she let Lavender talk about what sounded like one of the most sensationally useful books imaginable for a Muggle-born witch like her, until the other three relaxed and the conversation became more general. Then she took her leave.

"Hermione! What about the meal?" protested Harry.

"Sorry Harry, Ron there's a bit of an emergency on and I promised I'd work over the weekend. I'd better get back to it. It's been wonderful seeing you all. When can we do it again?"

"Soon, I promise," said Harry as he walked her to the door. "I won't let you be such a stranger in future, okay?"

"That's great, Harry. Maybe we can have lunch sometimes?"

*

It was very hard for Hermione not to cry on the way home, but the last thing she wanted was to make a spectacle of herself on the tube and have some creep think she was easy because she'd been dumped.

Though in truth it did feel as though she'd been dumped. Harry and Ron didn't need her any more. Ron's wife had never liked her, and Ginny, well they were all at different places in their lives these days. Half the evening she'd felt as though they were talking a foreign language.

She felt her lip tremble and firmed it. She would not get maudlin over the good old days. She would get off the train, stop at the all-hours delicatessen for some of the vital ingredients in the Hermione Granger Patent Cheering Up Workout, and go home. Nine o'clock. Plenty of time to get well and truly cheerful.

*

Severus had spent an exhausting day persuading an alternately flouncing and snarling Lucius that becoming the next Dark Lord was the answer to nobody's problems. By the early evening, when his headache was reaching levels that made him think the pounding in his skull could probably be heard by anyone standing within a five foot radius, he was beginning to suspect that Malfoy was deliberately baiting him. He stamped off to the rooms he often occupied at the Manor, downed a phial of headache potion followed by a pot of strong tea, and spent the next two hours reading the copy of the *Times* that he had filched from downstairs. He took out a biro and did the crossword, knowing how annoying that would be. Eventually, Lucius knocked on the door.

"No, I am not going to help you bring down the British government. No, I am not telling you how to subvert the wards on Downing Street. No, it is not possible to Oblivate the PM as the job comes with special protections. No, I will not..."

"Severus, I was merely going to suggest that we go and talk to your admirable and hard-working Miss Granger, to see whether she has made any progress," said Lucius through the panels.

"At last the man begins to see sense," Severus announced, opening the door.

Lucius was clearly anticipating his assent to the plan. He was dressed impeccably and carried a cashmere overcoat over one arm.

"Dear boy," he said, surveying the other man, "you can't possibly go out to London looking like that particularly not when calling on a lady. Spruce yourself up. I'll give you half an hour." He picked up the *Times* and frowned. "Make that twenty minutes."

Not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth and Lucius choosing to be amiable at this point was manna from heaven, he thought, casually mixing his metaphors Severus headed straight for the shower.

Shortly afterwards, two tall and very debonair gentlemen, one dark, one fair, arrived at the residence of one Miss Granger, spinster of some parish or other. They rang the doorbell.

*

Hermione's cheering-up routine generally went as follows:

Stage One:

1. Crop top, knickers, thick socks, no make-up, hair permitted to rampage wild and free.
2. Open bottle of wine plus large wine glass; good cheese.
3. Loud and bouncy music.

Succeeded by Stage Two:

4. Double choc (dark chocolate) ice cream with 74% cocoa chocolate splinters, chocolate sauce and extra chocolate; more wine.
5. Selection of favourite DVDs.
6. Dressing gown and teddy bear.

There were two reasons why she didn't hear the doorbell. The first was because, as nobody had ever rung it in the time she had lived there, she didn't know it was broken. The second was that she was well into Stage One and she wouldn't have heard it above the music anyway.

Severus was mildly concerned when Hermione didn't open the door; Lucius was mildly irritated. It was clear from the thud of music that she was at home. Lucius jabbed the bell again with his cane, then with a slight hiss dismantled the wards, unlocked the door and walked in, followed by a protesting Severus.

It would be hard to tell who was the more surprised Hermione, caught in the act of pogoing round her flat in her underwear, or her visitors, who were accustomed to thinking of her as a serious young woman. Not that either of them particularly minded the vision she presented.

Hermione shrieked and grabbed for her dressing gown. Her hand alighted on her old teddy bear, which didn't provide much cover.

"Miss Granger," said Lucius gallantly. "How nicely you have grown up!"

*

Fortunately, Hermione's sense of the ridiculous asserted itself. It wasn't as if the situation could get much more embarrassing. She flicked off the stereo and quickly donned her large red bath robe.

"Come in, gentlemen. Well come further in. What can I do for you?"

Even as Severus was clearing his throat, which was feeling a little constricted, Lucius smoothly took the lead.

He approached Hermione gracefully and raised her fingers to his lips.

"We were wondering, my dear, whether you might be persuaded to come to dinner with us."

Severus, who had noted Hermione's blush with chagrin, was pleased to see her frown and withdraw her hand.

"I've already been out tonight, thank you. It wasn't a success and I'm not much in the mood for getting dressed up again. Sorry." She fussed with the way her bear was occupying the corner of its armchair. "I'm afraid I haven't made much progress yet with finding a way out of the tax thing, either, so you've had a wasted trip."

Severus did a quick stock-take of Hermione's arrangements for the evening all the hallmarks of a person in need of consolation. He was no stranger to this frame of mind himself, and while Lucius' tastes generally ran to the more exotic end of the spectrum, he'd known the man in moods where a teddy would not have come amiss.

"Have you eaten this evening?" he asked with a frown.

She shrugged.

"Then it's my turn to buy supper. Is there a good Indian round here?"

His reward was to have a small smile bestowed on him alone.

"Well... If you're sure..."

Lucius, who looked anything but, remained silent at a glare from Severus. He used the time they took discussing the local takeaway menus to inspect Hermione's flat.

There were books. There were a *lot* of books, filling shelves and encroaching onto the floor. There were more in the bedroom, he noted, poking his nose through the door. There were one or two adequate art prints, and other than that the furnishings were simple, the colours warm and welcoming. The boxy Muggle gadgety things were an offence to the eye, though. He folded his coat and laid it carefully on the back of the sofa, then continued his inspection. He sniffed in disdain at the utilitarian bathroom and poked at the kitchen appliances with little interest. He had returned to the bookshelves by the time he heard Severus say,

"I won't be long. Will you be all right?"

Lucius rolled his eyes. As if he'd be stupid enough to do anything to the Granger girl. Especially without an alibi.

Alone with Lucius Malfoy, Hermione felt distinctly ill at ease. The last time she had seen him was at the trials, where his constitutional inability even to fake humility had assured him a very grudging reprieve thanks to extenuating circumstances. She suspected that the circumstances responsible for his avoidance of Azkaban would not have been found quite so extenuating had it not been for the number of people a) about whom Malfoy knew more than they were willing to have made public, and b) who were on the payroll. He had kept out of sight since then, but she couldn't believe that he would ever resist the temptation to continue pulling strings. She had never liked him and certainly didn't trust him yet here he was in her home, of all places, in need of her help. Bah! She wasn't helping *him*, she told herself. She was only working to protect him because for once by pure coincidence he stood in the front line defending the wizarding world.

He was running a finger along the spines of her books, scanning the titles, but also looking around him with a vaguely puzzled air.

"I don't suppose it'll pass muster any more than the rest of my things, Mr Malfoy, but would you like a glass of wine?"

His cheek creased slightly as he curled the corner of his mouth in a smile.

"You mistake me, Miss Granger. I do not seek to criticise. Your arrangements seem very comfortable, and yes, I would be delighted to share some wine with you."

Well, his manners were good, when he chose. He even waited for her to take a seat first before he sank down onto her sofa, leaning back and crossing his legs. Silk socks, she noted.

She poured two glasses of the Australian Shiraz she'd opened and waited for some conversation to happen. He raised the glass to the light as he ran the wine across his palate.

"Well, this is very... drinkable, I must say."

Hermione didn't really go in for small talk she'd never seen the point. However, Malfoy was sitting there drinking her wine and continuing to examine his surroundings as if something were amiss. After a very few minutes it became unbearable.

"Mr Malfoy, may I ask why you are doing that?"

Apparently a propos of nothing, he asked, "Where do you keep your shoes, Miss Granger?"

"I beg your pardon?" she blinked.

"Your shoes," he insisted. "Where do you keep them?"

Oh, shit, I'm shut in with a foot fetishist thought Hermione, desperately wondering when Snape would be getting back to keep his apparently insane friend in check.

"In the cupboard by the front door," she replied carefully.

"Accio Miss Granger's footwear," he commanded.

She squeaked as her slippers were yanked off her feet to join the neat arrangement on her coffee table.

Malfoy looked flabbergasted.

"This is *all*?"

Hermione did a quick inventory: slippers, going-out shoes, winter shoes, summer work shoes, sandals, trainers, and one very old and well-worn pair of walking boots.

"It's enough, isn't it?" She was completely baffled.

Malfoy turned his full attention on her and graced her with a smile at once charming and very satisfied. It made her even more nervous than before.

"What a remarkable young woman you are," he stated.

*

When he returned to the flat, laden down with sufficient food to feed an army of navvies for a week, Severus found Lucius alone in the living room, and Hermione was shut in the kitchen, making crashing noises.

"Lucius, what have you done?"

"Did you know that your Miss Granger possesses only *seven* pairs of shoes? I think she only buys shoes she actually *wears*! She's deprived, the poor child!"

"I thought you hated Narcissa's shoe habit," Severus said, wondering how on earth Malfoy and Hermione had managed to get onto this subject and what exactly had been said to make her hide.

"Yes, but Severus, even *you* have more footwear than this pitiful collection!"

"Oh, just shut up, Lucius. Put the shoes away, and mind your manners if you don't want the pair of us sent away with a flea in our ear. You being whimsical is probably the most frightening thing she's seen in a very long time."

He went into the kitchen and deposited his bags on the counter. Hermione was washing up forcefully.

"This isn't really what I had in mind for my Saturday night, you know," she said to the soapy water. "I think Mr Malfoy might be a bit unhinged."

"He has an odd sense of humour at times."

"I wish..." Hermione hesitated. "I wish he hadn't come. That it was just you."

She was still addressing the bubbles, but he felt a sudden warmth.

"I know you have little enough cause to like him, Hermione, but give him a chance. He's been very lonely, these past years."

At this first use of her given name, she looked up.

"You're a good man... Severus," she said. "But don't worry. I won't tell anyone."

*

It was an odd, and oddly pleasant, evening for all of them. Lucius was having a 'when in Rome' experience. He had never before eaten curry while seated cross-legged on the floor at an expanded coffee table. Nor had he ever had a spirited argument with anyone about what film to watch on the television while eating. Nor had he anticipated that any such activities could be remotely enjoyable.

Hermione would never, even in her most improbable dreams, have imagined that she would ever enjoy anything a Malfoy would say or do, but she found Lucius' opinions on the food, the wine, the films, and pretty much anything were entertaining and wittily expressed. He was clearly making an effort and for her, a Muggleborn and erstwhile opponent, which made it all the more astonishing. In fact, she found that the banter between him and Severus, and the way they turned to her for adjudication, both set her at ease and made her feel special. She realised that she had never seen Severus in a situation of equality and friendship with anyone before, and was touched to be included.

As for Severus, he found himself wondering what life might have been like had he ever experienced this sort of un-agenda'd companionship when he was younger. Even with Lucius, who had grown to be a good friend, he had always been guarded. Somehow, Hermione's presence defused that, and while they jibed at each other in their

customary fashion, it was less barbed than usual. Certainly the food helped, and the unusually large amount of wine they had all consumed

("Quaffed," insisted Lucius. "On such occasions, the process is known as quaffing!")

"Well, pass it over so I can quaff some more," said Hermione, reaching forward and inadvertently affording them both a splendid view of her cleavage.

"Lucius, stop leering at Miss Granger over the matar paneer and do as you're told."

"I vote we drop all the 'Miss Grangering' and 'Mr Malfoying'," said Lucius, holding the bottle just out of reach so he could continue to ogle.

"In favour," responded Hermione. "Now pass it over, *Lucius*, before I have to send Severus to get it for me."

"You don't want to come and fight me for it yourself?"

"Now you're just being silly.")

but he had never, in all the time he could recall, ever felt so unthreatened.

They ended up sitting on the sofa together, watching *My Fair Lady*. Hermione, in the middle, put a little space between herself and Lucius, whose apparent fascination with her shoes had resurfaced from time to time. This, given the dimensions of the sofa, put her very close to Severus. It seemed only natural that she should gradually relax against him, and that his arm should come round her shoulders, and that leaning should morph into something that could only be described as snuggling.

"Ah, what a charming tale," said Lucius slyly as the film progressed. "The lovely and spirited young protégée falling for her cantankerous and unattractive mentor..."

"He's *not* unattractive," protested Hermione sleepily from where her head was now resting on Severus' lap, one of his hands toying with her hair while the other rested carefully on her waist.

"Which makes you Colonel Pickering, you doddering old codger," Severus said. "Does Hermione really want you to play with her feet?"

"S'nice," she mumbled.

*

Hermione was woken by her bladder fairly early. She staggered out of bed (who had put her there?) and into the living room, where the dim light filtering through the curtains showed that her visitors had made themselves at home on the sofa and on the floor. That was unexpected, but perhaps just as well. None of them had been in a fit state to use magic the previous night, and the Floo would just have made them puke. Bladder empty and teeth cleaned, she was just beginning to realise the extent of her hangover as she headed for the kitchen. Ugh the air in the flat was redolent of sleeping men and stale food. Merlin it was just like being with the boys. She grabbed her laptop and started to make coffee.

She stopped in her tracks.

It really *was* like being with the boys, she thought. Only better.

Author Note:

"Navvies": "Navy" is a shorter form of "navigational engineer" (USA) or "navigator" (UK) and is particularly applied to describe the manual labourers working on major civil engineering projects. The term was coined in the late 18th century in Britain when numerous canals were being built, which were also sometimes known as "navigations". (from Wikipedia)

Also used in the phrase "to work like a navvy".

Five

Chapter 5 of 12

The Prime Minister needs money. It strikes him that he knows where there may be some to be found. Severus and Hermione join forces to thwart him and to protect Lucius Malfoy, who has the most to lose.

Voldemort Plus Ten: 2008

The place: Hermione's flat, Malfoy Manor

The time: Sunday

An hour with the computer and two mugs of coffee saw Hermione no closer to finding any answers to the tax problem. Despite the caffeine and the hangover potion she'd consumed, she still felt fuzzy-headed and was starting to get impatient with the computer, the kitchen, the fly that had got trapped inside the window, and the two men who were still sleeping like babies in her lounge. A walk seemed appealing.

She went to look at her unexpected and somnolent guests. Lucius was stretched out on the sofa, shirtless, one arm flung above his head and his white-blond hair framing his face. In repose, he still looked like an arrogant bastard, but there was a humorous curve to his mouth which alleviated the effect. Time was kind to wizards, she thought, admiring his torso and muscular arms. In his early fifties, he had a body that most men twenty years younger would envy. She turned to Severus, her face softening. He had pushed the coffee table aside and made himself a bed of cushions on which he lay on his front, bundled up in a blanket. She risked kneeling by him and gently smoothing the hair away from his face so she could see his profile such a wonderful great beak of a nose, such a kissable lower lip....

She left the flat silently, thankful they hadn't woken.

Of course, she was forgetting that she was dealing with Slytherins.

"So, what does the note say?" asked Lucius without moving.

Severus sat up, making a face as the movement caused his head to spin. He picked up the piece of paper Hermione had left on the table.

"*Towels and toothbrushes in the bathroom; hangover potion and coffee in the kitchen. Won't be long*," he read aloud, adding, "I do like the way she uses a semicolon most people would make do with a dash."

"She's considerate. I'm pleasantly surprised by her in general. And I don't mean her punctuation."

Severus snorted.

"Don't you think it was a bit over the top for you to display yourself like the cover of *Playwitch*?"

"Would you have preferred the centrefold? But in any case, I don't think you have much to fear, judging by the way she looked at you! Why don't you take the shower first and make yourself even lovelier for her return?"

It wasn't that Severus wasn't tempted to blow a raspberry he just didn't want to give Lucius the satisfaction.

*

By the time Hermione came back, the debris from the previous night had been cleaned away and her guests were showered and smug. This earned them a big smile, but seconds later, when she went into the kitchen, she let out a chagrined cry of "Oh, *shit*!" that brought them both to attention.

"Who the bloody hell used magic?!" she demanded. "My bloody computer's only gone and crashed! It's completely scrambled and it's going to take forever to get it back to rights!"

Lucius was confused. The 'computer' was sitting untouched on the kitchen table, exactly where she had left it. No sign of a crash or even minor damage.

"My dear Hermione, naturally we used magic you wouldn't expect us to clear up with our bare hands, would you?"

Hermione was, frankly, rather astonished that Lucius had involved himself in the clearing up at all. She drew a deep breath, seeking patience.

"I don't suppose you'd know, Lucius," *though you ought to* said the glance she sent Severus "but magic and Muggle electronics don't mix. At all." She jabbed at the keys and swore again. "My computer has gone belly-up thanks to your noble and much-appreciated efforts." The 'appreciation' bit came out through gritted teeth. "And to cap it all, it's *new*! I only bought it three weeks ago and..."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Oooh! The bastard!" she spat. "The complete and utter *swine*! I bloody *do* pay his bloody taxes! Seventeen-and-a-half percent in VAT on everything I buy in his precious bloody economy."

She stamped off to the shower, slamming the door and leaving Severus nonplussed and Lucius beginning to laugh.

"I've never before appreciated what it might be to have a Gryffindor on my side, dear friend, but I am beginning to think it might just be a good thing!" he chortled. "Be a good fellow and put the kettle on. I'll get breakfast."

By which it should not be understood that Lucius suddenly turned either his hand or his wand to mundane domestic tasks. Mr Malfoy's idea of 'getting breakfast' involved the rather more elaborate procedure of Apparating home and giving an exhaustive list of instructions to his household staff. He returned to Hermione's flat in order to drink a cup of tea and extend an invitation to a more civilised repast than the one they had shared the previous night.

*

The last Hermione had seen of Malfoy Manor had been through a haze of terror and pain, but the reassurance of Severus' embrace as he Apparated them both to the south terrace helped her to swallow her apprehension. Sunshine and the spectacular surroundings didn't hurt, either. Screaming, threats, and the crackle of hexes were all absent; in their place the rustle of a light breeze in the trees, and birdsong. Lucius was waiting for them at the open French window. He noted Hermione's hesitation at the threshold.

"Miss Granger Hermione allow me to apologise for what happened the last time you were here. Among the many things I regret from that time, that episode features strongly."

She gave him a slightly twisted smile.

"I dare say you had others to worry about who were more important than one troublesome Mudblood," she said, daring him.

"Quite. And how times have changed." He took her hand and bowed formally over it. "Welcome to my house. Come freely. Go safely. And leave something of the happiness you bring!" he quoted."

Hermione burst out laughing. She would never have expected Lucius Malfoy to be capable of such delicate and at the same time gallant self-mockery.

"What about me?" said Severus, sounding wounded.

"You practically live here, dear boy, and I'm *not* about to kiss your scaly paw, no matter how delirious with joy you make me."

Brunch was delicious, but over the perfect eggs benedict, toasted muffins, and other delicacies, they felt the need to address the problem that Arthur had so carelessly saddled them with.

Hermione leaned forward on her elbows, frowning as she outlined the situation.

"Now, we've bought a little time over the tax thing as a whole in that Arthur got the PM to agree to start with you and you only, Lucius. This means we can focus, and don't have to go running around from pillar to post putting out fires everywhere while we work out how to get out of this. And we can keep it quiet, so the whole of wizard-kind doesn't go on an indignant rampage."

"You'll have to put the fear of Abaddon into Arthur to keep his trap shut, Hermione. You know what he's like," said Severus seriously. "I think it will be fairly safe to assume the PM won't be in a hurry to start flapping his mouth about wizards and magic, but Arthur..."

"Oh, come on, Severus he went through two wars showing he could keep secrets, didn't he?"

"I know. But he's got entirely too comfortable of late, and goes around gossiping like everyone's favourite maiden aunt."

"I think we can be fairly sure that a word from me will reduce his sense of comfort significantly," said Lucius. "I put him in that job and I can just as easily take him out again."

"You put him...?" Hermione was surprised.

"Surely you don't think I've spent the past ten years twiddling my thumbs, dear girl?" Lucius exclaimed. "The general public might want to pretend I don't exist, but money and information still go a long way towards controlling events. I got rid of Shackbolt seven years ago when my wife ran off with him, and I installed Weasley five years later when it was plain nobody even remotely competent could be found without my intervention. It was sheer good fortune for the whole community that he brought you with him."

Hermione was caught between shock at Lucius' blatant and conscienceless manipulation, and pleasure at the compliment to herself.

"Well, anyway," she continued, "the bad news is that the PM wants to tax you not only on your income and for some reason he feels he can do you for back-taxes covering the last twenty years but also on your inheritance, no matter how long ago you came into it." She looked around her at the splendour and elegance of the breakfast parlour.

There was a brief silence.

"And when, exactly, were you planning to let me in on this, Severus?" asked Lucius.

"When you had finished having tantrums about the audacity of taxing you at all," he replied, unfazed by his friend's suddenly icy demeanour. "And probably also once you were too drunk to cast any hexes only by then I was having too much of a good time myself to remember." He glanced at Hermione.

"So you thought you'd let me do it, did you?" she countered.

"Well, it does seem to have worked out that way, doesn't it?" he replied blandly. "Besides which, Lucius has entirely too much style to hex a lady over breakfast."

On the other hand.... Lucius smirked at the memory of his last *dinner* with Narcissa.

Hermione stuck her tongue out at Severus.

"Ten points from Gryffindor."

"Children..." threatened Malfoy, but he was looking amused.

"Sorry. Right as I see it, our first move has to be to arrange as much of a delay as possible, while we continue to try to either find a way out of this or persuade the PM that it is a Very Bad Idea," Hermione resumed.

Lucius looked at his fingernails.

"I'm quite happy to do *that* sort of persuading," he offered.

"I think we'll keep that as a very last resort, thank you," she said primly.

"So what did you have in mind?" asked Severus.

"Well, Severus, since you're obviously going to be the official liaison between Number 10 and the Ministry, I think you need to be very convincing to the PM about your discovery of the infinite and labyrinthine processes of wizarding bureaucracy "

"Not too difficult, as it's the truth."

" while I continue to look for a get-out or at least a loophole. And you, Lucius...", she said, turning to him.

"Bossy, isn't she?" Lucius remarked.

"...need to talk to the goblins about the best ways of hiding your wealth, at least temporarily."

"Perhaps we might do that together," he suggested.

"But surely you don't need us to hold your hand?"

"Not at all, in one sense, but the goblins' systems make ours look like simplicity itself, and having you two high-flyers flanking me might look sufficiently impressive to speed things along a little."

"As if you can't do 'impressive as all hell' in your sleep," teased Hermione, blushing rosily when she realised what she'd said.

They discussed it a little more, but there wasn't much else to say until they had more information. Lucius eventually set down his cup and rose from the table.

"Severus, have you the energy to continue in the library? Draco has managed to recover some of the texts that were sent abroad, and they are waiting for you. I'd like to know whether they are intact or not before we replace them in the collection."

"Are they the Third Kingdom potions scrolls?" asked Severus, his dark eyes suddenly alight as he practically bounded from his chair, heading for the door.

Hermione very much wanted to follow him, but Lucius was speaking to her even as Severus disappeared from view.

"Hermione, I am sure you would like to see something of the grounds. I should be delighted to show you, and the dogs need some exercise." He noted her reluctance. "Let him play with his toys alone, my dear, until he is ready to show them off to you. Come along with me for the present."

He tucked her slightly resisting hand into his arm and stepped onto the terrace. They walked round the end of the house (which took quite a long time) discussing the landscaping and other such neutral topics, until they reached the archway into a large and well-kept stable yard. Lucius clicked his fingers, and two enormous wolfhounds trotted into view. Unknown to Hermione, her approval rating received a tremendous boost from the way she immediately greeted them, holding out her hands for the smell test. She passed. The dogs were leaners, and nearly pushed her off her feet vying for her attention as she sought out the best scratchy places.

"How wonderful!" she exclaimed. "What are their names?"

Lucius looked a little uncomfortable, so she fumbled at the collars to examine the tags.

"'Whim' and 'Caprice'?" she giggled.

"My son's idea of a joke. He gave them to me as puppies, a few years ago." Lucius caressed the dogs' ears and led the way to the stables.

To Hermione, it spoke volumes both that the dogs clearly adored him, and that he had kept their teasing names. He was gentle with the horses, too, as he passed by their boxes, greeting them with a pat or a word.

"Do you ride, Miss Granger?"

"I haven't been on a horse since I was ten."

"How scandalous. You will find some appropriate clothing in the second tack room."

Narcissa's jodhpurs made Hermione think evil thoughts about skinny women, but a Charm made them just about big enough, and Lucius deeply admired the close fit. He was already mounted when she emerged. He was breathtaking, she had to admit. Put a powerful man on a powerful black horse and... hello, hormones! Still, she wasn't going to think about that. She was also very careful not to think about it when he helped her down an hour later, making sure that their bodies grazed along their entire length before he stepped back as if nothing had happened.

"I'm sure Severus will be in the library, if you want to find him now," he said.

*

He wasn't.

But a house-elf directed her to his suite of rooms, which is where she found him reading, not an ancient papyrus, but the *Sunday Times*.

With bright eyes and flushed cheeks, her hair escaping in wild curls from its plait, and immodestly tight jodhpurs encasing her hips, buttocks and thighs, she made an enchanting picture, Severus thought tiredly, the hangover fatigue having finally triumphed over the potion. She came bounding over to him and he recoiled involuntarily. Damn Lucius, sending her up here stinking of horse he knew it was a smell he couldn't abide. And now Hermione looked as though she'd been slapped, all the sparkle fading from her gaze. He stood up.

"I excuse me, I... dislike the smell of the stables," he said awkwardly, lapsing unconsciously into the expressionless tone he used in everyday life.

"I'm sorry," she said in a small voice. "I didn't know." She turned to leave.

"Perhaps you would like to use my bathroom?" he suggested hastily as her hand closed on the doorknob.

He tried his best to concentrate on the newspaper, but the thought of Hermione Granger naked in his shower made even the style pages incomprehensible. He was chewing absently on his pen while gazing blankly at the puzzles when she emerged, swathed in a bath robe much too big for her.

For her part, Hermione found the shower an interesting experience, knowing that Severus Snape was in the next room. He was chewing on a biro when she emerged, his bath robe draped loosely round her body. The pen pulled at his lower lip enticingly. He frowned as he looked up. He frowned when she took his face in her hands and lowered her mouth to his. And he frowned when she sat on his lap and deepened the kiss. Hermione didn't mind. She loved his frown. It was a challenge.

Lucius permitted himself a smile when he let himself silently into Severus' living room to return Hermione's clothes. He stayed for a while to listen to the sounds coming from the bedroom. It had been a minor stroke of brilliance to neglect to tell her about the showers in the stable block. Not for nothing is one a Slytherin.

*

Hermione had seen through the ploy fairly quickly, and found she didn't mind at all. But the relationship between the two men intrigued her.

"When did you and Lucius become friends?" she asked Severus, snuggling closer to him under the covers.

His arms tightened around her.

"Do you really think this is the time to talk about Lucius?" he grumbled.

"He made this happen."

An unintelligible mutter in her hair.

"For which I shall carefully *not* express my extreme gratitude next time I see him," she added.

"Yes, he'll be insufferably pleased with himself as it is."

"So...?"

"I see you've never lost your habit of asking annoying questions."

She waited, gently stroking his long fingers where they lay on her waist.

"Very well, Hermione," he sighed, rolling onto his back. "Lucius took me under his wing when I first arrived at Hogwarts. I don't think anyone was more surprised than I was the glamour boy of Slytherin adopting a half-blood runt but you have to understand that there is an immensely strong bond of loyalty in our House. Lucius taught me how to defend myself against those Gryffindor thugs, and he patched me up after every encounter, before I became proficient. I worshipped him, I think. Then he left, but he still wrote from time to time perhaps he saw potential in me, I don't know and there were gifts. It was probably of little significance to him, but for me.... I would have done anything for him, and I did. And once it became very clear what a monumental mistake it was to tie ourselves to Voldemort, I think he felt responsible. There has been liking between us for a long time; during the final year of the last war, necessity taught us to trust each other. That's all there is."

Apart from the myriad details, the risks, the fear, the shame..., she thought.

"He still looks after you, doesn't he?" she said aloud.

Severus snorted.

"Even to the extent of engineering this," he said bitterly. "Hermione, I'm too "

"Shh! Forget all the 'too old, too ugly, too damaged, too whatever' stuff, right now. Lucius may have hastened us to this point, but he engineered nothing." She kissed him, then drew back to look seriously into his eyes. "Believe me, Severus."

He drew her close again, gradually drifting off to sleep. Hermione remained awake for longer. She looked around her at the elegant bedroom, thought about the enormous house and estate, and considered the man who lived there, alone but for his one friend.

And you look after him, too don't you? she added silently.

*

Author Note:

Lucius' quotation as he invites Hermione into Malfoy Manor:

"Welcome to my house. Come freely. Go safely. And leave something of the happiness you bring!"

These are the words spoken by the Count to Jonathan Harker on his arrival at Castle Dracula. From chapter 2 of *Dracula* by Bram Stoker.

Six

Chapter 6 of 12

The Prime Minister needs money. It strikes him that he knows where there may be some to be found. Severus and Hermione join forces to thwart him and to protect Lucius Malfoy, who has the most to lose.

Voldemort Plus Ten: 2008

The place: the Ministry, the Leaky Cauldron, Gringotts, Muggle London

The time: Monday

It was an apprehensive-looking Minister who stepped through the fireplace into his office rather earlier than usual on Monday morning. It was a Minister who expected to be thoroughly told off. It was a Minister who had spent nearly the whole weekend tinkering in his shed in order to avoid confessing to his wife what he had done. It was a Minister who was reduced to trembling nerves by the fact that his aide was in an inexplicably sunny mood when she walked through the door carrying an armful of files.

"Good morning, Minister!"

"Good morning, Miss Granger." He didn't risk the hug.

Hermione dumped the folders unceremoniously on the Minister's desk and opened the diary.

"Hermione..." Arthur began.

"Sit down, Arthur. We have a lot to get through, and I want you to pay attention."

"Hermione, I'm..."

"What's done is done. Now we have to try to deal with it. I haven't the patience for excuses or apologies, Arthur, so let's just get on, shall we?" She Summoned a chair of her own.

Arthur wasn't used to this. He was used to post-mortems, emotional blackmail and many, many words; he was used to making excuses, sidestepping issues, and putting on the charm. Witnessing Hermione take the bull by the horns in such a fashion suddenly made him very glad for his son's sake that she had turned him down.

She sat, winced, and conjured herself a cushion.

"Unusual amount of exercise this weekend," she explained. "Now here's what we're going to do."

Arthur learned that he was going to be called on to exercise the very skills he had developed in his married life to stall any and all pressure from Downing Street to get on with sorting out taxes. Throwing bureaucracy in the path of the ravening hordes was his role. For the moment, Hermione and Snape were going to handle the rest of it.

"Now, Arthur, I'm going to do my utmost best to get us out of this mess," *your mess*, he heard, "but it's going to take time. I'm going to have to do a lot of research, which means that I will be working half days. I need to use my computer, so I have to be outside the Ministry. So now you and I are going to go through the diary, make sure that the bare essentials of my duties can be completed in the mornings, and show you what needs to be done in the afternoons. You're going to have to do some of the donkey-work," she warned, giving him a stern look, "and you are not going to deviate from the guidelines we settle here because I don't have the time to clear up after you. Now, let's get on. Mr Malfoy is going to be here at noon, and I shouldn't imagine he will be in much of a mood to brook delays."

Arthur gave her a doleful look.

"Hermione, I'm so sorry to have thrown you into the path of that man," he said gently.

In return, he received an expressionless glance.

"You might have thought of that before. However, I dare say I will manage and Mr Snape can be relied upon in a crisis."

*

Lucius was in full Intimidation Mode when he swept into Arthur's office. Hermione kept her expression neutral as she rose from her chair. Arthur unwisely chose to attempt bonhomie.

"Lucius! What a long time it has been!" he exclaimed, extending his hand.

Malfoy glanced at the appendage as though it were a rotting fish.

"Weasley," he said. "Miss Granger, I trust the Ministry is not going to fall apart without you while you are assisting me with the rectification of this, erm, situation."

"Assisting *you*?" exclaimed Arthur. "Hermione isn't working for you, Malfoy!"

"I beg to differ. Since you have decided to offer me as a lamb to the slaughter," Lucius sneered, looking un-lamblike, "and Miss Granger is attempting to undo your sterling efforts, she *is*, in fact, being so good as to work on my behalf. Come along, Miss Granger," he ordered peremptorily.

Arthur looked so upset and guilt-ridden that Hermione relented for a moment and patted his arm, before she was ushered out by her tormentor. She was laughing, though, as she stepped out of the fireplace at the Leaky Cauldron.

"That was cruel, Lucius!"

"Then why are you laughing?"

"What did he do this time?" asked Severus, making room on the bench for her.

"Oh, he came in looking as magnificent as can be and gave poor Arthur the full 'you are an insect' treatment. I must say, I never thought I'd enjoy seeing anyone on the receiving end of that, but just at the moment....," she shrugged. "So, what time's the appointment at Gringotts?"

Lucius, very pleased at being referred to as "magnificent", leaned back in his seat.

"There is time enough for lunch, my dear, and apparently " he glanced around " to stir up a storm of gossip."

Sure enough, nearly everyone was glancing their way with expressions ranging from puzzlement to outright hostility. What was worse was the presence of a large group of Aurors, including Harry and Ron, having what had been a rowdy lunch together until Malfoy arrived. Hermione's heart sank as she could almost sense the testosterone levels in the pub soaring. There was some discussion at the other table, and then Hermione's friends rose and approached. She glanced at her companions. Severus was poised and watchful; Lucius was lounging indolently, looking at the menu, but she noticed that his hand was resting on the head of his cane.

"Hey, guys," she greeted the boys.

"Is everything okay, Hermione?" asked Harry. "Snape," he acknowledged, glancing at Severus. Lucius, he ignored. Ron, on the other hand, was glaring openly.

"Of course, Harry why shouldn't it be?" Hermione tried for a light tone, but she was both annoyed and embarrassed.

"Don't pretend this is all normal, 'Mione," snapped Ron. "What the hell are you doing here with Malfoy? It's bad enough that you're with Snape again..."

"You're being very rude, Ronald," she replied evenly.

Ron shook off the hand that Harry had put on his arm.

"You're in bad company! I want to know that you're all right!"

"Then why are you looking at Mr Malfoy and Mr Snape, and failing to address your concerns to me if indeed your concerns are for me?" Hermione said. "I am perfectly able to take care of myself, and frankly it's none of your business. Please stop making a scene and go and enjoy your lunch."

Ron turned angry eyes on her.

"I'm an Auror, Hermione, so it is my business..."

"What? To harass people who are committing no crimes, and to interfere with discussions sanctioned no, *required* by the Minister?"

"My dad would never..."

"The *Minster* has entrusted me with something important, Ronald. It might be a good idea if you let me get on with it, don't you think?"

"Come on, Ron," coaxed Harry. "If Hermione says it's official business. Sorry, Hermione just wanted to make sure."

"That's fine, Harry..."

"Blimey, she really does think she's running the country," said Ron.

So that was it.

She turned her back on them and sat down. "Have a nice lunch, Harry, Ron," she said.

Severus watched Potter pull the Weasley boy away, then turned his gaze to Hermione's set face. She was looking at the specials board and plainly seeing nothing. Lucius flung his menu onto the table.

"I think we can find somewhere a little more civilised for our discussions, don't you, Miss Granger?" Heading for the entrance to Diagon Alley, he tossed a couple of Galleons to the barman. "A round of drinks for the gentlemen of the law, please, Tom!"

*

It was a novel experience for Hermione to spend time with two men who put themselves out to restore her good humour, rather than rolling their eyes and talking about Quidditch while waiting for her to 'get over it'. By the end of lunch, she even felt almost ready to face the goblins. Generally, she kept her visits short and uncontentious, but this time....

Lucius demanded to see the Director of the bank. The goblin at the desk asked if they had an appointment and received a long stare in response. Hermione read the subtext: Malfoys don't need to make appointments. She didn't know whether to be amused or apprehensive about what kind of reception this would get them.

They were shown down a series of corridors before their guide knocked at an ornate door, which he then opened. An unusually tall goblin stepped from behind the desk.

"Mr Malfoy, it is a pleasure. My name is Goldfinger."

Hermione and Severus exchanged an amused glance.

"Mr Snape," said the goblin, adding, "Miss Granger," in a tone too neutral to sound anything but hostile. "Am I to hope that you have come to make amends for the dragon incident?"

She cleared her throat.

"That was all explained a long time ago, Mr Goldfinger," she said.

"Explained, yes; justified I don't think so," he replied in the same expressionless way. "However, that is beside the point for now. What can I do for you today, Mr Malfoy? Judging by your escort, it must be something important." The goblin's eyes gleamed.

Lucius explained the need for concealment of his wealth, should Arthur be unable to hold back the Muggle government inspectors before a solution to the problem was found.

"This is not an insignificant thing you are asking of Gringotts, Mr Malfoy," stated the director. He leaned forward and steepled his fingers beneath his chin. "Many rules will have to be, at the very least, bent. This will be ... expensive."

"Just how expensive?" enquired Lucius suspiciously.

"You know what we want."

"And you know that it is not something with which the Malfoys are prepared to part."

The goblin sighed.

"Might I suggest that we adjourn to a less formal setting, where refreshments will be served to you, for our negotiations? I have something I must see to beforehand, but I will join you shortly."

The clerk, whose name was *not*, much to Hermione and Severus' secret disappointment, Oddjob, conducted them down some more passages to another ornate door, which he opened to reveal an opulent meeting room, complete with a side table embellished with coffee and cakes. Lucius led the way impatiently inside, but as Severus and Hermione crossed the threshold, the door slammed behind them and the illusion faded. They were shut in a featureless vault, lit only by a weak lamp suspended in a cage from the high ceiling. The refreshments turned out to be a tin jug of water and one battered cup. Never let it be said that goblins were liars.

"What the...?" began Hermione.

But before she had time to say more, Lucius was in action. His face contorting into a snarl of pure vexation, he whirled, drew his wand and fired off a curse straight at the lock. Severus jumped forward to knock his friend's arm up and disrupt the spell, but Malfoy was quicker. It was, of course, a wasted effort. The lock was goblin-made. The curse ricocheted, causing them all to duck. What was less expected was that it kept on going, bouncing off the end wall of the vault and coming back for them at a slightly different angle. The men, busy yelling at each other, did not notice, so it fell to Hermione to cast *Protego* over them all. There was a glare of sickly yellow light as the curse bounced off the magical shield, going crashing into another wall and continuing its crazy route round the vault.

"It's no bloody use! Calm down, man!" Hermione heard Severus snap over the hiss and fizzle as the curse hit her shield again.

"They'll regret this...", hissed Lucius.

"Do you *mind*?!" she shrieked, her wand arm beginning to shake from the effort she was putting into her spell. "It may have escaped your notice, but this bloody thing is amplifying with each bounce, and I can't even begin to try to neutralise it without some bloody help! Lucius what did you *DO*?"

"It's a simple disintegration spell it shouldn't be doing this!" he yelled back. They all flinched at another impact.

"I can't hold it much longer DO something!"

"Containment Charm both of us!" shouted Severus. Lucius nodded grimly. "Hermione, as soon as I give the word, lower your shield. Got it? NOW!"

Hermione lowered her wand and instinctively curled into a ball with her arms over her head, so she didn't see what the wizards did to stop the curse, but when she dared to look, they both had their wands trained on a seething ball of yellow energy. Between them, they were compressing it, forcing it to become ever smaller. Lucius was sweating, his mouth clamped into a thin line; the cords were standing out in Severus' neck as he put all his strength into the task.

"The jug, Hermione!"

She rolled to her feet and ran for the jug, which she placed on the floor between them. They forced the glowing ball into it and let go. There was a hiss of steam, a flash, and a loud bang. Then all that was left was a puddle of molten metal. And silence.

Hermione sat down suddenly, feeling a strong need either to giggle or to cry, but she forced herself to do neither. It took a good few deep breaths, and quite a bit of clinging to the hand that Severus laid on her shoulder, but she managed.

"Why... why have the goblins imprisoned us?" she asked.

"I think this is what counts as 'negotiation'," Severus responded drily. "Lucius? Aside from the little matter of you learning to control your temper, there must be something you have that the goblins want very badly if they're prepared to risk killing the three of us with this kind of security measure."

Lucius ran his hands back through his hair a little shakily, avoiding their eyes.

"Please accept my apologies, both of you," he said.

"Lucius...", threatened his friend.

"Very well. All *right*! It's the armour."

"What? The one in your entrance hall?" said Hermione, remembering a very fine assemblage, engraved, embossed, and inlaid with gold.

"Indeed. It is goblin-made their finest ever and was worn by my ancestor Cyrus de Malfoi at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520. In it, he was invincible, and he, alone of all the French knights, so impressed King Henry that he was awarded estates in England." Malfoy was all pride as he recounted the bare facts.

"It's lovely, Lucius. And I'm right in thinking you would never part with it, not even over your dead body?" Hermione continued.

"Certainly not!"

"How about over ours, as we either starve to death in here, get slaughtered by a stray spell, or gassed because I, for one, am beginning to need the loo?"

He blinked a little at that, and Severus snorted with laughter.

"Lucius," she said gently, "have you ever worn the armour? Did your father? Grandfather? Great-grandfather? Anyone since the sixteenth century? No? Then it's just a lump of metal. A pretty one, to be sure, but a lump of metal nonetheless. The Malfoy name is more than that, surely?"

She went to sit against the wall, where she leant her head back and closed her eyes.

"Think about it," she added.

The goblins were quite accommodating once Lucius reluctantly declared that he would agree to their terms. Hermione stayed diplomatically in the background while the arrangements were made. She could see how much it pained Lucius to part with a treasured piece of family history, and didn't want to make it any worse for him. Severus was sufficient support. As they left the Director's office, she held back, allowing them some privacy and mulling over again the closeness of their bond. A clawed hand closed on her arm. It was Goldfinger.

"My thanks to you, Miss Granger," he said. Evidently, he had been listening in to the conversation in the vault. "I think we may consider your part in the matter of the dragon... resolved."

"You're welcome, Mr Goldfinger. Oh and just one thing? It might also be in *your* interest to do the best job possible for Mr Malfoy, because if the Prime Minister gets one

toe-hold in our economy, he's going to come after Gringotts, too."

Her steps were light as she emerged from the bank into the chill, grey afternoon.

*

They found a nice wine bar in Muggle London in which to calm their nerves. Hermione had rather a bad conscience where Lucius was concerned, but he seemed to have shrugged that matter off and had resumed his usual impeccable gallantry. Severus was behaving as though nothing of note had occurred, so she decided to follow suit but she had to confess to herself that Lucius' exhibition of volatility had been unnerving. Impressive, but distinctly unnerving. Yet he had followed Severus' lead through the crisis....

"You seem distracted, Hermione," Severus remarked, taking her hand.

"Not really," she smiled. "But I'm going to have to go home soon and see if I can beat my computer into submission so I can carry on with undermining the government."

"Perhaps I might help," offered Lucius.

Hermione was surprised. Surely he knew nothing of computers?

"Severus, would you trust me with Hermione for a little while?" he continued. "I'm sure you have something you could be getting on with until we reconvene for dinner."

"Just don't go anywhere without plenty of witnesses," Severus warned Hermione. "Yes, Lucius, I'll let you have her, but do try to bring her back in one piece. I'll meet you here at six-thirty."

One squeeze of the fingers, and he was gone. All of which smacked of male plotting, she thought, giving Lucius a suspicious glance.

"Drink up, my dear," he instructed. "We have somewhere to be."

*

Kevin, junior manager of an up-market computer specialist's, perked up at the end of his long day to see a pretty young woman push the door open. She was followed by a... rock star? It wasn't someone he knew on sight, but then Kevin was in his early twenties and this man would have been performing for an older generation, but, oh he was way cool, in an opulent-goth sort of way. Long blond hair, pulled back into a highwayman's pony-tail, rich black suit cut long and worn with a green brocade waistcoat and... *snake*? jewellery, and a cashmere coat.

"Have a look around, my dear, and see what catches your eye," said the rock star to his daughter.

"What are you up to, Lucius?"

Not his daughter, then.

The man answered with a shooing motion and a playful tap on the girl's bum with the cane he was carrying. *Weird, but rich, very rich*, thought Kevin, feeling rather like a rabbit in headlights as the man approached.

"You are in charge of selling these machines," stated the rock star.

"Yes, sir." Kevin was annoyed that his voice came out rather tremulous.

"I wish to buy one for my assistant. The sort she can carry around."

"Well, sir," began Kevin, "there's the newest model..." He quavered to a halt under a contemptuous stare.

"I don't want to be lectured, boy. I want a computer. The best. Do you understand?"

Kevin swallowed and nodded. The young woman was at the other side of the shop, but she had turned to listen and was beginning to look concerned.

"Get me the best, make sure it has everything it could possibly need, and sell it to me. Bearing in mind, of course," said the man in friendlier tones, "that there will be consequences, should the thing not be absolutely perfect."

Kevin found that he had no desire to find out about the consequences.

"Hermione, my dear," said the man, turning those cold eyes to his companion, much to Kevin's relief, "why don't you verify the details with the helpful young man?"

"This really isn't necessary," she said with an admirable lack of fear.

"On the contrary. I am partly responsible for breaking your present machine, so it seems only fair. In addition to which, I am used to the best. You are working for me, so I insist that you should have the best to use in my service. Now do get on with it this place is unbearably tedious."

Kevin spent ten minutes discussing the specs with the girl. He'd never done anything so fast, but she was focused and, he felt once the grilling was over, a good match for her employer.

"Very well," he said, "that'll come to...", and he named a satisfying price.

The man produced a gold credit card, at which the girl looked surprised, for some reason.

"You should be aware, Hermione, that wherever I may happen to find myself, I always try to have the means to get what I want." He leaned close to speak softly in her ear. "Exactly what I want."

*

She couldn't deny the frisson she had felt at Lucius' words. It confused her and kept her quiet as he completed the transaction and they left the shop.

"Knut for them?" he enquired, tucking her hand into his arm in what she was beginning to recognise as a habitual gesture.

"This really wasn't necessary, Lucius," she said quietly, looking at the shop windows on the far side of the road. "But thank you, anyway. Sorry, I'm not being very gracious about it, am I? I'm not used to receiving lavish gifts out of the blue."

"Such a shame, my dear." He glanced at his pocket watch. "Now, we must hurry Severus can't abide tardiness, and I can't abide it when he pouts."

She laughed and picked up her pace.

They were late, but Severus wasn't pouting. Far from it. He was waiting at a table tucked into a cosy niche, a bottle of Pauillac open and breathing next to three glasses on

the table, and a very satisfied smirk on his face.

"That's the 'I've just caught Harry Potter breaking the rules again and I'm going to get to punish him because Dumbledore's not here' expression," teased Hermione. "I haven't seen that one for a long time. What have you been up to?"

"Three bookshops," he replied, ignoring Lucius' eye-roll, "and... this."

He produced a large box from under the table. He opened it to reveal a lovely pair of boots, simple, elegant, in a fine and supple brown leather that called out to be touched.

"Do you like them?"

"Severus! They're lovely!"

"Let me put them on you."

It was a curiously intimate thing to be doing in public, more so under Lucius' predatory gaze, but Hermione found that such qualms were far less important than the feeling of Severus' hands slipping the boots onto her feet and cradling her calves as he zipped them up. Then there came a brief caress of magic as he shaped them to fit her perfectly. Pleased with himself, he looked up.

"Hermione! What's the matter?"

Her eyes were brimming with tears. She looked from him to Lucius and back again, then flung her arms round his shoulders and began to sob into his collar. He held her tightly until she quietened.

"Hermione?"

She shook her head and wiped at her eyes with the back of her hands.

"Sorry. I must look a fright."

Severus, confused, looked to his friend.

"I think, dear boy, that our Hermione is simply unused to being treated like the priceless treasure she is." He poured the wine. "Now, drink up, both of you. Severus, show us the books you bought, and let us have a civilised conversation. Tomorrow, the real work begins."

*

Seven

Chapter 7 of 12

The Prime Minister needs money. It strikes him that he knows where there may be some to be found. Severus and Hermione join forces to thwart him and to protect Lucius Malfoy, who has the most to lose.

Voldemort Plus Ten: 2008

The place: the Ministry, Hermione's flat, Malfoy Manor

The time: passing

Time flies when you're having fun. And Hermione, to her surprise, was having a lot of fun.

She discovered the joys of bullying Arthur Weasley into some semblance of efficiency rather than running round after him picking up the pieces like a good little minion. Arthur worked well and had many strengths, but he needed a firm hand. (Which explained a lot about Molly.) Hermione savoured the knowledge that she was, effectively, running the Ministry, but doing it behind the scenes. Arthur was the front man, dealing with the whingers; she was the *eminence grise*. There were days when she almost wished she had moustaches to twirl.

Her afternoons she spent at home with her splendid new computer, working her way through the morass of British tax systems and laws. It was frustrating, since for every day when she thought she was making progress she had another where she felt as if she'd been beating her head to a bloody stump on the keyboard, but on the other hand, it was research. She'd always liked getting her teeth into a problem, and this was a meaty one indeed. She had no answers as yet, and over the two weeks that followed the trip to Gringotts, she had begun to face the fact that things were looking bad for Lucius and, consequently, for the rest of them. But she was damned if she was going to be beaten. Severus took to saying that on her example, the symbol of Gryffindor ought to be a mule.

And then there was the company she kept.

She had lunch a couple of times with Harry and Ron in the Ministry canteen, but although she got on well enough with Harry, there was no sense of a deeper connection any more, which saddened her. Between her and Ron, there was too much history and jealousy, underscored by the loving counsel of his wife, to allow even that much. She tried to restore their friendship, but it was plain that he was only there to satisfy Harry. She was even honest enough to admit to the pair of them that, stuck in a morass of bureaucracy and committees as she was, she envied them their opportunities to go out and use real magic. Ron thought she was being patronising. They argued and parted company.

"I've been flogging that particular dead horse for far too long," she said regretfully over dinner. "It's just that they represent so much of what's been important in my life. It's hard to accept that the friendship's not really there any more." She sighed.

"They've had more than they deserve of you over the years, in any case," replied Severus. "A combination of mediocrity, luck and recklessness that would have failed ten times over without your support."

"Severus!"

"Don't bother defending them, Hermione. I saw you all grow up remember? I can accept that you were justified in giving them all that energy and intelligence while there was a threat, but all through Auror training, too? I've been poking around, and I strongly suspect you only dropped out of the Department of Mysteries programme and joined them because they *had* to have your help to tie their shoelaces."

"But..."

"You wouldn't be tying Arthur's now, if it weren't for your constant need to try to bring them up to scratch."

"Well, it's a bloody good thing for us all that *I* am with Arthur now!"

"You'd do better to leave them behind, Hermione, before they hamper you further. And anyway, it's no use trying to resurrect something long dead."

"Oh, *really*?" she sniped, looking pointedly at the scar on his neck.

"Children, children," interposed Lucius. "Hermione, I think what Severus is trying to tell you, in his uniquely chivalrous fashion, is that you are, and always have been, much too good for Potter and Weasley. And that you should be glad that you are now completely at liberty to devote yourself to your own most worthy and ambitious goals once you've seen to mine, of course."

Yes indeed, the early and rosy days of Hermione and Severus' romance were spent, not in each other's exclusive company, but with the frequent and, curiously enough, not unwelcome presence of Lucius Malfoy.

On the evening during which the preceding conversation took place, our happy couple were dining at Malfoy Manor, having already formed the habit of alternating between there and Hermione's flat. Their first evening had been spent in seclusion, indulging in the murmur of sweet nothings and the ritual disembowelment of the idiotic statements they had found, variously, in government memos viewed at Downing Street, Ministry development proposals, the daily papers, and the evening's offerings on television. The following evening, Lucius invited them to a sumptuous repast at the Manor, where the conversation flowed like wine, and the wine like water. The day after, Severus discovered that Hermione hated cooking, and that if he were not to subsist on take-away food or tinned beans while in her company, he was going to have to do something about it. He flooded the Malfoy elves for supplies, which arrived in a large basket borne by Lucius, who stayed, but graciously did not overstay.

For her part, Hermione learned that Severus was as finicky and obsessive in the kitchen as he had ever been in a Potions classroom, and while he did not actually deduct house points for talking, she could see that the instinct remained. Even silent ogling of his hands and arms while he worked was discouraged, much to her disappointment. But while Severus was ignoring her for the two hours that seemed necessary to the construction of a salad, she didn't have to be lonely not with Lucius for a companion. He proved to be entertaining and widely knowledgeable about many things, and despite the perplexity caused by his constant flirtatious teasing, and the knowledge that she was not as immune to it as she felt she ought to be, she had to admit that it was pleasant having him around.

*

Severus stopped in the doorway as he returned from the bathroom. Hermione lay asleep in the dim glow of the streetlights through the curtains, naked but for his green silk tie. Looking at her, he couldn't quite believe his luck.

"I know you're there," she said, and stretched provocatively, deliberately acting the wanton for him.

How privileged he was. No one else saw the woman beneath the smart robes and the officious manner. No-one except perhaps.... He suppressed the unexpected wish that Lucius were there to share his pleasure in the sight. He shook his head. Close as their friendship was, some territories were best left unexplored.

Hermione opened her eyes.

"Well? Are you bringing that body back to me or not?" she asked impatiently.

"Why don't you like Lucius?" inquired Severus, fitting himself against her lush curves and pulling the duvet up.

"What makes you think I don't like him?" She snuggled close and idly ran her fingers to and fro across his stomach.

"He's concerned. You never go to the Manor without me, despite his invitation."

"That was serious? All that 'come freely, go safely' stuff? I didn't think he really meant it I'm just not sure I'm really all that welcome, being what I am, and all..."

"Lucius never says things like that lightly, Hermione. And as for your being a Muggle-born, well you ought to have seen by now that all the Pureblood guff he used to spout was just code for deep-seated elitism. Lucius is an intelligent man: he's seen pureblood families produce everything from incompetence to insanity, and he's witnessed the contrary in you and in me."

"Exceptions to rules?"

"You are exceptional, and you know it. And besides, Lucius' 'rule' is that everybody, regardless of bloodline, is beneath contempt unless and until they can prove otherwise. Hhhnnnghhhh!"

Hermione's hand was getting busy lower down.

"Shut up about Lucius. I've got something pretty bloody exceptional here and it's *far* more interesting. Now kiss me."

There were times, Severus reflected, when following orders was a joy.

*

During those two weeks of relative calm, the Prime Minister was having (as he would never have admitted within a mile of any journalist and still further where the Cabinet were concerned) one sod of a time. His popularity was sinking by the day, half his party wanted to oust him, the country, under the guidance of the press, was becoming ever more forgetful of his achievements as fuel prices rocketed and winter hove into sight. He was a desperate man. Severus watched the signs with unease.

"Can't you push that Granger girl into acting more quickly?" the PM complained, two weeks to the day after the Gringotts meeting.

"She is rather difficult to get hold of, sir," said Severus, force of habit leading him to Occlude his memories of the hold he'd had on her early that very morning. "And when I do see her, she informs me that bureaucracy takes time and that Mr Malfoy is being obstructive."

"Well, time is running out, and Mr Malfoy can just..."

"I understand you, sir. I will do my best."

"Tell her I want a meeting with Arthur Weasley tomorrow evening. No wriggling out of it. And I want that portrait back in his frame so I can get messages delivered pronto in future."

"Yes, sir. Oh, and by the way, sir, I'm going to need your signature on a few things so I can finish dealing with that army matter." Which sidetracked him for a little while, at least.

*

Hermione jumped when the alarm on her Floo pinged. She hurriedly shut down the computer before the surge of magic could induce silicon carnage.

"I take it we've run out of time?" she said as Severus stepped through.

"Astute as ever, Hermione."

"Well, it would be a little out of character for you to nip out for a quick bit of hanky-panky during office hours," she teased, and started to gather her papers together. She squeaked as she was seized from behind and lightly bitten on the nape of the neck.

"Don't tempt me, woman," Severus growled. "But as it is, Lucius will be here soon, and..."

"...and won't mind a bit if you two want to carry on," continued Lucius, dusting Floo powder off his shoulders. "Don't mind me." He picked up Hermione's teddy bear and took its place in the armchair, according them a look of polite attention.

"Pervert," said Severus.

"Do we want a cup of tea before we start?" Hermione offered.

"Let's get right to it, shall we? Hermione, do you have anything at all that can help?"

She sighed.

"Short of Lucius declaring independence of the Crown and digging a rather large moat, no. Or not yet. As it stands, I'm beginning to wonder whether it might not just be easier to cave in, hide as much as we can, and pay the minimum. I'm sorry."

"We will have to do better than that, Hermione," said Lucius, for once dropping his humorous tone. "I will *not* pay anything to a Muggle regime from whose inept attempts at administration I benefit not one jot. Neither will I be responsible for setting the precedent which lays the belly of the wizarding world bare for their greedy Muggle knives."

"Then I need more time, and perhaps some constructive ideas ones which don't involve overthrowing the government. Ye gods," Hermione continued impatiently, "surely it can't be that bad? How much money are we talking about, anyway?"

"Put it like this," said Severus. "Lucius could probably pop Bill Gates in his pocket and rattle him around with the loose change."

She goggled.

"And we don't want the PM getting any idea of the fact. In his present mood, he'd fall on a toddler's lunch money, given half a chance, and the last thing we want is him getting the idea that Lucius is representative of our community as a whole."

"Too kind, dear boy."

Hermione was still gaping at Lucius. He smirked.

"Sorry," she said. "I just.... Isn't that kind of money a bit, well, does it actually *mean* anything above a certain amount?"

He shrugged.

"It's a way of keeping score."

"And of maintaining stability," Severus said. "Without you "

"I think the less said about that, the better, don't you, Severus?" Lucius remarked firmly, giving his attention to the bear and toying with its worn fur. "You know, Hermione, I think I'm going to take this little fellow home with me. He's been looking quite dejected since his eviction from the paradise of your bed."

"*Lucius!!*"

"What? I can't have the bear?"

Severus sighed.

"Just to return to the matter in hand for a minute, the PM is insisting on a meeting tomorrow. I've undertaken to pass on the message as best I can, and I have to be seen to succeed if my place at Number Ten isn't to be compromised. Hermione, if you can't find anything useful, at least try to cobble together some good reasons for delay; I'll speak to the goblins to ensure they're more disobliging than usual; and Lucius brace yourself."

*

The office was rather crowded. Not only were the PM and Severus there, but a retinue of five HMRC inspectors had been invited to attend. They did not, for the moment, know what the meeting was to be about, but Severus was already working on ways of keeping their mouths shut. The opportunities for breaches of security made him shudder. He had tried to persuade the PM that a smaller team perhaps two people would be more appropriate, all things considered, but the PM was in a truculent frame of mind and had decided that a show of strength was the thing. The man had no idea. Fortunately, one could rely on Arthur and Hermione to be civilised.

Oh, bugger. He'd overlooked the one little fact that Lucius was not a man constitutionally inclined to sit in his garden shed waiting for the bomb to drop.

"And who is this, Mr Weasley?" the PM was saying, while the tax inspectors tried unsuccessfully to mask their shock at the emergence of three people from the fireplace.

Severus' hand was ready to whip the wand from his pocket at the slightest wrong move, even as he gave Hermione a brief glare and she returned a helpless shrug.

"I am Malfoy," said the gentleman.

"Ah!" said the PM, a trifle uncomfortably. "I understand you are the person who is to lead the way in the new arrangement between our communities."

"Do you, indeed?" Lucius enquired. "And you are...?"

Hermione's eyes were dancing; Severus relaxed a little while Arthur made an anxious introduction or two. Lucius was going to be playful. This didn't necessarily make him safe, but the potential for actual violence was reduced. Malfoy arranged himself artfully on a chair. He leant his cane just so against the arm and flicked his hair casually back over his shoulder.

"Shall we begin, then?" he said, gesturing for the others to be seated.

Having demonstrated that he was in charge, he then seemed quite content to let everyone else conduct the business.

Hermione, watching Lucius while the PM delineated the task at hand, was mightily amused by his behaviour. It put Arthur in the shade and neatly tumbled the PM down a rung or two in the pecking order. She very much doubted whether this would achieve anything other than pissing off everyone, but as they had no other game to play for the moment, there was at least some entertainment to be derived. One person at least seemed very taken with the performance.

"Angela Westwood, head of the HMRC team," said a woman who, at around forty, looked far better than Hermione had ever done, even on days when she made an effort. A beautifully manicured hand, along with a sunny smile, was bestowed on Lucius. "I am here to help organise everything to everyone's satisfaction."

Her poise, in the face of the revelation that there was such a thing as magic and that two real wizards and a witch were sitting in the same room as her, was admirable. But then, thought Hermione, this was a tax inspector a money-seeking missile with all the human warmth of an alligator.

"To help. How very kind," purred Lucius. His eyes gleaming, he gave the fingers a caress that brought a full-lipped answering smile.

Stupid bitch, thought Hermione, who disliked the woman on sight.

"Allow me to introduce my associate, Hermione Granger," Lucius was saying.

"Ms Westwood," Hermione acknowledged.

"Mrs, actually," she was corrected in an open and friendly manner. "It's a pleasure to meet you, *Miss* Granger."

Which established quite neatly how they were going to get along, Hermione thought.

Once everyone was settled around the table, the PM invited the HMRC team to outline their procedures. Mrs Westwood began issuing her unpalatable message from between perfectly painted lips.

Lucius yawned.

"Mr Malfoy?" inquired Mrs Westwood.

"Do forgive me. You were saying?"

"We will need to have full access to your accounts, lists of assets, and other financial records..."

"Accounts?" said Lucius vaguely.

Severus rolled his eyes. Arthur looked as though he was going to start sidling back towards the fireplace. Hermione took a deep breath and sternly controlled her features before gently explaining to him the phenomenon of book-keeping.

"Oh!" he said, light evidently dawning. "Oh, my *dear* Mrs Westwood, I'm afraid I never trouble myself with things like that."

She gave him a look like that of a particularly smug piranha scenting blood.

"You'll have to speak to the goblins about all that sort of thing," he continued, fiddling with the head of his cane.

Westwood blinked, and Hermione noticed one of the others mouthing "Goblins?" with a disbelieving stare.

"See to it that Gringotts is informed, would you, Miss Granger?" said Lucius. He uncrossed his legs and stood.

"Certainly," she replied and made a note of a date the following week when she might be inclined to pass on the message.

"And now I really must be going. Delightful to meet you all. Delightful. Oh, and Prime Minister? You do realise what it means that you are undermining one of the cornerstones of the pact between your... society... and ours?"

"I do, Mr Malfoy," said the PM gravely.

"I thought not. Well, adieu. Come along, Miss Granger, Arthur."

The Granger woman lingered a minute in order to wave a little stick at them all.

"You are hereby placed under a geas," she announced. "Until such time as I release you, none of you will be able to speak of this in the hearing of anyone not currently in this room. Any attempts at communication of this matter, no matter what form such attempts may take, will be understood by others as mere gibberish." She smiled. "And you don't want to end up looking stupid, do you?"

There was a brief pause after she left.

"Goblins?" said the junior HMRC inspector out loud this time.

"What's Gringotts?" said another.

"A geas," snorted Angela Westwood contemptuously. "What rubbish."

"Mr Snape," sighed the Prime Minister, pinching the bridge of his nose, "would you please furnish Mrs Westwood with the necessary information and directions?"

"Certainly, sir. Just as soon as I manage to pin down Miss Granger again and get them myself."

*

Reviewing the encounter, the PM felt less complacent about his plans than before. Malfoy might be your typical upper-class twit, unable to glue his mind to anything serious, but somehow he had managed to get out of the meeting without submitting to any definite plan of action. The ghastly Westwood was going to plague the life out of him until he could give her something concrete, and in addition, she evidently thought he was consorting with lunatics.

He picked up a sheaf of documents, only to discover that sections of text were missing. Damn printer on the blink again. He threw them back onto the desk and seized on the newspaper that he hadn't yet had time to read. Same thing. *Bloody wizards!*

"Snape!!!" he bellowed.

*

They reconvened in Hermione's flat.

"Whose was the Random Erasure charm?" asked Severus.

"That was me," said Hermione. "There's tea in the pot if you want it."

"And some rather good chocolate biscuits," added Lucius. "They almost make up for the Muggles having produced such " He searched for a word. " people."

Severus helped himself and sat down at Hermione's other side.

"That was one of mine, you know," he admitted, rather pleased that she had used one of his creations.

"I know. I caught sight of it in your old Potions book before Harry had to hide it, and I never seem able to forget a potentially useful spell. It's going to affect everything that's brought into his office, you know."

"Really?" Snape was interested. "Then you've improved on it. My version was very specific just aimed at particular documents. Potter's and Black's essays, usually."

"Chocolate Olivers," said Lucius contemplatively, reading the tin. "More chocolate than biscuit. I ought to look into buying the company."

"So what did you do to him?" Severus enquired, snaffling another before Lucius ate them all.

"Oh, he won't notice for a day or so, but I used another of yours the Phantasm hex? He'll start seeing things out of the corner of his eye before long. You really were a very creative little boy, you know. And you?"

"Doxy eggs in the back of his desk drawer. They'll mature in about four days."

"That's a little direct for a Slytherin, isn't it?" asked Hermione.

"Simplicity has a beauty all of its own," he said piously. "Hermione, I'm loath to go on the offensive too soon, but would Arthur be prepared to drop some of the protections if necessary? The odd dragon-sighting, for example? Nothing that won't be dismissed by the papers as coming from the lunatic fringe, but which the PM will know for what it is."

"I should think so. What with Lucius breathing down his neck and that Westwood creature slavering in front of him, he seems pretty much ready to do anything I tell him to."

"That's my girl," Lucius approved.

"*Our* girl," he was corrected.

"Does that mean I get the last biscuit?" she said, leaning back into the sofa cushions between them.

*

Eight

Chapter 8 of 12

The Prime Minister needs money. It strikes him that he knows where there may be some to be found. Severus and Hermione join forces to thwart him and to protect Lucius Malfoy, who has the most to lose.

Voldemort plus ten: 2008

The place: Malfoy Estate, and Meringham Park

The time: a couple of weeks later

"The Master is in the Transfiguration room, Miss," said the house-elf when Hermione emerged from the Floo in the entrance hall. "Follow me, please."

Until that moment, she had not been aware that there was such a thing as a Transfiguration room at the Manor but then, despite Severus' assurances, she had not until now visited Lucius' home unaccompanied, never mind gone exploring. He could have been hiding Westminster Abbey in there and she would never have known, the place was so huge. The elf led her up a third flight of stairs to a surprisingly plain oak door, where it left her to her own resources and wits.

The door was ajar, so Hermione peered round it before announcing her presence. With Lucius, caution was generally the wisest policy. It was a long, barrel-vaulted room, plainly decorated, but furnished with assorted tables and cases containing a plethora of randomly-assorted objects. North-facing, the windows admitted a clear though not brilliant light. Lucius was working at a bench placed side-on to the door, totally absorbed in his task as he pushed an object through a multitude of Transfigurations, changing it not only in form and composition, animate and inanimate, but also in size. Hermione was impressed at his facility alterations in volume, mass and density as well as shape were never as simple as they looked, and yet here he was, pushing whatever the original thing had been through a rapid series of changes that made Auror-level tests look like exercises for ickle firsties. She wondered why he was doing it.

She spoke as he eventually laid down his wand and reached out to pick up the simple round stone that lay before him.

"Lucius?"

"Hermione!"

She blinked as his face broke into the first completely unguarded expression she had ever seen on it. He was handsome at the best of times, but with delight curving the corners of his mouth and crinkling his usually cold grey eyes, he was... devastating. And here he was, advancing towards her with both hands outstretched in welcome.

"At last you have decided to visit me as a friend should," he said. "What a great pleasure! And what brings you here, my dear?"

She didn't want to break his mood too soon, so she gestured towards the bench.

"That was quite a virtuoso performance!"

"That? Oh, that was nothing. Solids are really quite simple, but one needs to be really limbered-up before working on gases." He noted her look of curiosity. "It's a hobby, Hermione. We idle rich have to do something with our time. And in any case, I want to be fully what's the expression? on the ball before updating the textbooks."

"The textbooks?" Cogs whirled. "The *school* textbooks?!"

"And those of the Ministry. Emeric was my great-uncle, and used 'Switch' as his pen-name Hufflepuff humour." Lucius rolled his eyes. "It's a family tradition, shall we say the books, not being a Hufflepuff."

"Draco never said a word!"

"Draco never knew. He was quite sufficiently insufferable as it was, don't you think?"

Hermione laughed and moved further into the room, carefully touching some of the items lying around. Some of those which had been left mid-way through the Transfiguration process were very interesting, bizarre, or even grotesque. She was glad none of these involved animals it had always sickened her to see the results of failed transformations at school, and had been a major motivating factor for getting everything right. She picked up a bar which looked as though it was half lead, half gold.

"It's a good thing the ancient Muggle alchemists never saw this sort of thing. They'd have had an apoplexy."

"Idiots. One can never change the subatomic structure of matter without using magic mess it about a bit, perhaps; crack it ever smaller, of course. But change it? Pah!"

He Summoned a lump of iron ore and casually Transfigured it into a nugget of gold. "Child's play," he said. Concentrating a little, he then shaped the nugget into a locket embossed with a small but very lifelike portrait of Severus. "For you, Hermione, in honour and mockery of your heritage. You will find that it always bears the image of your true love."

He ushered her out of the room.

"So if you are of a fickle turn of mind, my dear, I suggest you keep it out of Severus' sight. Now as I suspect from your expression you are the bearer of ill tidings, let us adjourn to more congenial surroundings."

Hermione was completely at a loss for words. In ten minutes, Lucius had allowed her to see more of himself than ever before, and she was deeply confused.

*

"Severus! What's the emergency? Hermione is being coy about it," said Lucius as they entered the library to find Snape irritably pacing.

"To be honest, Lucius, I don't really know either, yet," Hermione hedged. "All I got was a message on my coin saying 'time's up.'"

"The HMRC people have finished at Gringotts. They are royally pissed off both at the treatment they have received from the goblins, and by the fact that you apparently have no cash to speak of. The Westwood woman is on the warpath."

"Well, if I have no money, then there is little they can do, so there's an end to it. Let them tax the Weasleys and the Potters if they want to add a few Knuts to their coffers."

"It's hardly that simple. Weasley said you were the wealthiest man in our community, didn't he? That means that if you are cash-poor then you are asset-rich. The tax inspectors want to inspect your estates."

Lucius looked out of the window.

"And then?"

"And then they will want to take some of them away."

"Muggles. Here. And confiscation of Malfoy property. I think not. It's time I had a serious talk with your precious Prime Minister." He sounded ready to bite.

Hermione hunted through her pack of papers.

"It won't help," said Severus. "Between Westwood nagging him and the magical 'slippages' he keeps having to call for Aurors to fix, he is not feeling particularly sympathetic at the moment."

"It is of little moment how the man feels. He will be brought to understand that he is in error, and that the consequences of persisting in his error will be... painful."

"You can't go in there firing off hexes like there's no tomorrow, Lucius! See sense!" snapped Severus. He stopped his restless movement to face the other man squarely.

"Do you *know* what the consequences would be? The term 'witch hunt' wasn't coined as a metaphor and these days the Muggles are capable of a great deal more damage than they were four hundred years ago."

"I will *NOT* submit to this outrage, to this invasion by a pack of stunted oath-breakers!" Lucius snarled through stiff lips.

"Then you will find yourself living through another war. A worse war and one of your making. Lucius *think!*"

"I will *NOT* allow..."

"Stop it!" cried Hermione. "Just... stop right now. Please."

She gestured round the library, where the signs of magic getting out of control were evident. The two men exchanged a glance and backed down from the confrontation, both breathing hard.

"Hermione...", began Severus, reaching for her hand.

"Forgive me, Herm," Lucius said at the same time.

"Just shut up and listen! Shouting gets us nowhere." She drew a deep breath. "Now sit down, the pair of you, and start thinking like Slytherins instead of like men."

They sat. Hermione faced them, hands on hips, wearing an expression that reminded them strongly of McGonagall.

"Now your basic Gryffindor tactic when faced with a threat would be...?"

"Charge in like a mating erumpent," offered Severus.

"You're too kind. But what does a Slytherin do when threatened?"

"Use the threat as " began Lucius.

"An opportunity!" they all said together.

"So the PM wants money. *Why* does he want money?" asked Hermione.

"Because the economy's going arse over tit, everyone's watching their purse strings, and the whole country regards him as a failure," Severus said.

"So, instead of offering him money....," she prompted.

"We offer him something he wants more," finished Lucius. "Thereby both getting him off our backs and placing him in our debt. Severus, you have brought a gem into our little circle."

"Well, don't get cocky, boys," Hermione blushed. "Because you two are going to have to work out just exactly what to give him. And now here's the bad news, sort of, for you, Lucius."

He raised an enquiring eyebrow, causing her to wonder briefly whether Severus had picked up the trick in emulation of his youthful idol.

"That Westwood woman moves fast very fast. She's been bogged down by the goblins for a week and she'll be in a hell of a mood, if I'm any judge of character. She's been handed carte blanche by the PM and she's going to wave it about until *she* gets what she wants. We're going to have to let her have a little of that, I'm afraid, while you work on something for the PM."

"Which means?"

"You're not going to like it."

"I think we've established that. Tell me."

Hermione pulled a print-out from her bag.

"Okay the thing that often happens when someone inherits property is that they have to sell off a part of that property in order to pay the tax due on the inheritance. However," she said more loudly, to cut off whatever Lucius was about to say, "there is a get-out: the Conditional Exemption Heritage Property tax incentive."

Severus snorted and then, looking at Lucius' unsuspecting expression, began to laugh silently. His attack of hilarity rapidly threatened to get out of hand, and he excused himself with a gesture, heading for the far end of the room.

"Severus?" Hermione was concerned.

"I think you had better tell me the worst," said Lucius sourly. "My friend has an entirely too well-developed sense of the absurd, at times..."

Hermione thought she heard the muffled words 'adventure playground' coming from the shadowy recesses between the bookshelves.

"...and while it may have helped him keep his sense of perspective in his former life, it has an unfortunate tendency to break out at inappropriate moments."

"Well, it's quite simple, really. All you have to do is declare your property to be part of the nation's heritage, and then it won't be taxed."

"...tea rooms!..."

"Entirely too simple. The catch, Hermione, the catch."

She sighed.

"Very well, then. You have to allow public access. And you have to *prove* that you are allowing public access. Sorry, Lucius. As long as we don't have anything better to offer the Prime Minister, you're going to have to let Muggles in."

*

Hermione sent a gently fuming Lucius off with the National Trust handbook so he could familiarise himself with the horror to come. Then she cornered Severus.

By the time she discovered his hiding place, he had regained his calm, but there was still a look of unholy amusement on his face. It suited his saturnine features, making his mouth, in particular, irresistible. So Hermione didn't bother troubling herself with resistance.

"I don't suppose it's the *Malleus Maleficarum* that's making you smirk like that," she said, unglueing her lips from his and tipping up his book to read the spine. "What on earth got into you?"

"The potential for disaster inherent in this whole situation..."

"Is hardly a laughing matter, I would have thought."

"Oh, but just wait until you see la Westwood again, Hermione. The woman's a... a barracuda! She's been in my office every bloody day, talking about Lucius this and Lucius that. Quite frankly, I don't think she knows whether she wants to destroy him or marry him, but whatever it is, their next encounter will be worth selling tickets for." He laughed again. "I don't know who to be sorrier for, though right now, Lucius gets the lion's share of my sympathy."

"I see what you mean," she replied, smiling back at him. A propos of nothing, she added, "I do love you, Severus."

"You do?" he sounded surprised.

"But of course I do! Did you doubt it?"

"I can't do otherwise than doubt it, Hermione," he said.

"Don't do that, Severus. Never do that. I'll have to tell you more often, won't I?"

"It would help," he admitted wryly, and drew her tightly to him, so she could no longer see his face. She found it hard, sometimes, to keep up with his changes of mood.

"Lucius gave me something today," she said, remembering the locket.

"He did?"

She showed him.

"I don't know why he made it for me, but I think he's pleased you've found some happiness, you know."

Severus traced the likeness of his own face with a careful fingertip.

"He made it?" he said neutrally. "He must really like you, Hermione. I know of only two other people for whom he has actually created something."

"And you are one of them."

"Yes."

"Poor Lucius. I think we need to take him for a day out, Severus. With ice cream, and postcards, and things to climb on."

"And you say I have a strange sense of humour."

*

Hermione was never quite sure afterwards how the day culminated in plans for larceny on a fairly egregious scale, but what was certain was that Lucius learned enough about letting the Great Unwashed trample over hallowed sanctuaries to provide him with an almost evangelical fervour for helping the PM out of his plight.

They hired a car for the trip. It would have been simple enough to Apparate to the vicinity, but as Hermione said, if they were going to research the opening of a stately home, then they were going to do it properly. Severus, revealing another unexpected skill, took the wheel. By the time they arrived, Hermione was a nervous wreck and Lucius looked green.

"I'm driving back," said Hermione as soon as her feet were back on terra firma.

"Yes, Severus, do please give Hermione the keys. Now would be a good time. Thank you, dear boy."

"My dad always said I drove like a little old lady," protested Severus.

"And the little old lady in question would be...?"

"Granny Snape. Fine old buzzard, she was. Could get a hundred and twenty out of a Reliant Robin." He saw their faces. "I'm *joking*! Honestly some people can't cope with a little excitement."

"Whirling and stalking off don't work nearly as well without the billowy robe, you know," Lucius remarked.

Hermione giggled.

"He was an absolute maniac on the Quidditch pitch, you know," confided Lucius, taking Hermione's arm and setting off in leisurely pursuit. "The Slytherin trophy cabinet the one in the common room has a whole shelf dedicated to his exploits as a Beater. He broke limbs on the entire Gryffindor team in his fourth year, and after that McGonagall insisted on either banning him or making him Keeper."

"And Gryffindor never scored another goal against us until I left school. It was more satisfying than ensuring they all went down with dysentery before every match which was your advice, I seem to recall. Will you two stop dawdling?"

"Hermione, my dear, is it really necessary to have such a huge area for storing just seven cars?" Lucius was surveying the car park and the ugly little pseudo-classical entry booth.

"It's mid-week in late autumn, Lucius. At the height of the season, the car park will be full to overflowing."

"What an eyesore."

They came to the gatehouse, where Severus paid what seemed an inordinately large amount of money for the three of them to gain entry and a lavish guide book. Hermione flicked through it to the estate plan, which she spread out on one of the picnic tables in the courtyard.

"So what do you want to do first?" she asked.

Lucius was eyeing the amenities askance, curling his lip at the tastefully-designed and discreet-but-clear signs directing them to the Saddlery Cafe, the Lady Meringham Restaurant, the gift shop, the family activity centre, the educational centre, the Meringham Garden Centre, the toilets....

"They let people *pee* in here? Complete strangers? Common people?" He was aghast.

Severus looked at the threatening November sky and wrapped another coil of his black scarf round his neck.

"I suggest we have a look at the grounds while it's still possible. Come along, Lucius. Stop cringing and try to have a good time."

"Here?" Lucius said faintly.

The gardens of Meringham Park proved soothing to the Malfoy nerves, up to a point. Some visionary seventeenth-century lord had spent a great deal of time planting trees in well-chosen spots, thus creating for his ancestors a pleasing variety of romantic woodlands and open vistas. A few silly little temples and grottoes added accents, and the gardeners clearly had a talent for persuading the English countryside to look pretty even under dull autumn skies. Hermione thought the cross-country jumps were an unsightly intrusion into the general effect, but Lucius said he rather fancied having a go. Severus unshrunk a basket he produced from a pocket and induced them both to come on a mushroom hunt along the smaller pathways in the woods.

He and Hermione were arguing over the identity of a nondescript little fungus that might or might not have been extremely poisonous when a rushing, crackling noise alerted them to the fact that they were not alone. Coming down the narrow path at breakneck speed were three garishly-costumed people on mountain bikes.

"Watch out!" shouted the one in the lead.

Severus and Lucius both reached to pull Hermione up from where she was crouching, their hurry causing her to lurch into a tangle of brambles. The basket of mushrooms was upended and half the contents crushed. Lucius was liberally splashed with mud. His wand was out in the blink of an eye.

"Lucius, no!" shouted Hermione as she clung to Severus for balance, trying not to fall further into the blackberry patch.

But, almost out of sight, one cyclist skidded and fell hard, another swore as several spokes snapped and his rear wheel buckled, and the third, swerving to avoid crashing into his companions, instead careened into a tree.

"Don't look at me like that, Hermione no-one died!" Lucius helped to get her back on the path, then assessed the damage to their persons. "Dear girl your lovely jacket is scratched to bits!"

"Oh, *what*!?" Hermione was very fond of that leather jacket. "Serves them right," she growled, surveying the damage. "This'll never look right again!"

Lucius paused in restoring his customary elegance to flick his wand at her. "Hey presto!" he said sarcastically. "You really don't think like a witch, sometimes, my dear."

"Pack it in, Lucius it's not her fault she comes from a Muggle family." Severus had fished a shrunken first aid kit from another pocket in his black trench coat and was hunting for a salve for Hermone's scratches. "Old habits die hard," he said, seeing her look. "I never leave home without it. There you are good as new."

They picked up what remained of the mushroom haul and headed back for the formal gardens. Hermione glanced back at the groaning cyclists.

"Should we send help, do you think?" she asked worriedly.

"No," replied both her escorts.

The gardens were pretty, but loud-voiced ladies in tweed, stealing cuttings and discussing their neighbours' doings, were guaranteed to charm neither Malfoy nor Snape.

"Is it lunchtime yet? We can go to the restaurant via the playgrounds, to see what the set-up is." Hermione noted their reluctance. "We might as well see the whole thing, you know."

The area for very young children was deserted and bleak under the drizzle; the adventure section, which sported an impressive range of challenges, nevertheless left Lucius particularly disappointed.

"You mean, they call it a snake pit and dangle children over it, but there aren't any snakes at all? Where's the fun in that?" he complained.

One lone, harassed-looking mother was trying to patch up a grazed knee on her daughter while also supervising two boys as they charged around alternately throwing themselves onto the equipment and kicking a football around. She winced as they tore a muddy path right between Hermione and Severus.

"I'm so sorry!" said the woman. "Are you okay? I am *never* taking them out ever again not until they're at least thirty. Brian! Stuart! Come and say sorry!"

"Just imagine a whole horde of the little darlings all running around in the sunshine, having fun," said Lucius stiffly as they continued on their way. "Now, shall we see what horrors the catering department is to perpetrate upon us?"

The soup wasn't bad, though it was expensive. The steak pies were volcanically hot and of indifferent quality under their towering lids of chemically-excited puff pastry, and were also expensive. The carrot cake and tea were superb, and almost worth the price. Even Lucius had to admit that especially as he went back for a second slice. However, the ambience of scrubbed pine and mass-produced olde-worlde decorations didn't encourage lingering, and it was with some relief that they finally entered Meringham House itself.

One of the advantages of the English climate is that in a stately home, on a Thursday in November, one will usually have room to breathe and even to look. One may stop to poke fun at the bulgy gods and hefty nymphs cavorting on the ceilings ("I don't think I could rest easy with her floating above my bed," said Severus), one can snigger at the dirty jokes in the papyri collected by Lord Whatsit on his Grand Tour and subsequently mistranslated as love songs, and one can stop for as long as one wants to admire the most stunning portrait one has ever seen.

"Oh wow!" Hermione breathed, entering yet another salon and coming face-to-face with the Duchess Caterina. The lady in question was undeniably one of the most beautiful women Hermione had ever seen young and fresh of complexion, but also possessed of great dignity. She was seated on a throne, gorgeously robed in silver silk and heavy gold embroidery. An enormous and ornate ruff framed her face.

"Severus! Lucius! Come and look at this!"

"I can't believe he translated it as 'woven purse'," Severus was saying as they entered. "What a dunderhead!"

She was reading the handbook entry aloud.

"...and it's one of the last portraits Rubens ever painted," she finished. "Isn't she..." Hermione didn't complete the question. She stopped, open-mouthed, when the portrait unmistakably smiled at her.

"My Lady," said Lucius, bowing formally.

"At last!" said the Duchess with a strong Italian accent. "People I can actually speak to without sending them mad! And who are you, that you should be visiting this Muggle establishment?"

Lucius performed the introductions with his usual flair, rather embroidering her and Severus' accomplishments, Hermione felt. But she was flattered, and blushed.

"Ah! A Malfoi! I should have known by your looks, Signor! I see that your family has lost none of its poise with the passing years."

The flattery went to and fro for a while. Then it emerged that the Duchess's Squib grandson had sold her portrait when he lost his fortune at the gambling table, and since then she had been obliged to behave like dead paint well, ever since accidentally sending one of the daughters of the house to Bedlam.

"I *die* of boredom, my friends! It is bad enough to be stuck in this stupid corset and ruff, but all I have to look at all day is the same set of chairs, those stupid landscapes, and troops of lumpen Muggles! There is nobody to talk to!" She lowered her lashes and looked through them at Lucius. "Just think how my existence would be lightened, were I to be placed next to that wonderful picture of Sir Guy de Malfoi that dear Pieter Paul made. *Such* a dear friend...." She sighed dramatically and placed a hand to her breast. Then, catching Hermione's ironic stare, she laughed. "These Malfois!"

"Producing an exact copy would be quite a challenge," said Lucius.

"Especially as the Muggles have very sophisticated ways of detecting fakes," Severus added.

"I can't believe you're seriously considering stealing a Rubens!"

"Come, now, Hermione," cajoled Lucius. "Would you really feel good about leaving Caterina here?"

Severus took her hand.

"And in any case, we'll need your help an undetectable copy demands some very complex Arithmantic input, you know. And we're both aware that's one of your strengths."

"It'll be fun, too," Lucius added. "There's never enough sheer fun in life!"

"You're a very irresponsible pair," she said.

They were on the point of leaving, having given their promises to the Duchess, when she called Hermione back to have a quick word.

"It is good to see a young witch of this modern world," mused the lady. "So much has changed your hair, your clothes, your speech.... And your two wizards treat you completely as an equal! What an extraordinary young woman you must be. I look forward to knowing you better."

Hermione choked a little.

"They're not both I mean, I'm with Severus! Lucius is a friend, that's all!"

"Really, my dear? Well, it is good to have such... friends," said the Duchess archly.

*

Author Notes:

- 1.The National Trust: an organisation dedicated to the protection of the nation's heritage. <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/>
- 2.The Reliant Robin: a small, three-wheeled car and butt of many jokes. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reliant_Robin
- 3.Meringham Park is my invention. However, the portrait of the Duchess Caterina is closely based on a Rubens portrait to be found at Kingston Lacy in Dorset. <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-vh/w-visits/w-findaplace/w-kingstonlacy/w-kingstonlacy-seeanddo.htm> This page bears a photo of it.

Nine

Chapter 9 of 12

The Prime Minister needs money. It strikes him that he knows where there may be some to be found. Severus and Hermione join forces to thwart him and to protect Lucius Malfoy, who has the most to lose.

Voldemort Plus 10: 2008

The Place: Malfoy Manor

The time: the following Monday day of the Visit

Severus was fretting. They were late. And despite warming charms, thick clothes and restless pacing, it was no day to be out of doors.

Today was the day the HMRC inspectors were coming to view the Malfoy estate and to discuss its opening to the general public. The arrangements were in place a few pegs and lengths of string marking out putative alterations, some cobbled-together proposals and plans for access and amenities, all cut-and-pasted on Hermione's wonderful computer and professionally bound thanks to the Number Ten stationery supplies cupboard. Lucius had perused the entire thing with an air of gentle tragedy, uttered a few choice death threats in put-upon tones, and returned to his work-rooms.

A weekend's brainstorming together had produced more in the way of a good entry into the world of international art theft than appealing offers to present to the PM.

Hunching his shoulders against a particularly unpleasant gust of wind, Severus nevertheless felt warmed, recollecting how the three of them had filled the small drawing room a 'snug', Hermione had dubbed it with scribbled-on parchments and Muggle paper, books devoted to the production of magical paintings, empty glasses and tea-cups, and, most importantly, the sounds of conversation and laughter. Yes, they had argued at times, but in the comfortable knowledge that disagreement was not the inevitable precursor to either hexing, hitting, or walking out. He suspected the situation had been just as much of a novelty to Lucius as it was to him. He had definitely caught Lucius looking at Hermione a few times with an expression that might, on another person, have been described as impressed. As for her, she was radiant, clever, warm, funny, and open in her expression of pleasure. He had the impression that she felt liberated by being with two people in whose company she was not obliged to hide her intelligence. Sweet Nimue, those years with Pottter and Weasley must have been purgatory.

A car horn blared through his train of thought.

Coming down the lane towards the temporarily un-Disillusioned gates of the Manor was one of the Ministry vehicles. As it passed through, its tyres crunching on the gravel, Severus caught a glimpse of Hermione in the front passenger seat, looking thunderous. He trudged up the driveway in the car's wake, with a Bad Feeling in his gut.

The car swept round and drew to a smooth halt in front of the house. The driver cut the engine and got out. Coming up level with them as the man went to open Hermione's door, Severus noted that he, too, was stony-faced. What was going on? Surely even Westwood couldn't antagonise everyone this early in the day.

"Don't ask," said Hermione as he opened his mouth. "Just. Don't. Ask."

She drew a deep, restraining breath before nodding to the driver to open the rear door.

Lucius, festively dressed for the occasion in unrelenting black with one black pearl nestling in his cravat, was treated to the vision of Angela Westwood stretching one lithe and exquisitely-stocked leg out, her foot resting just so on the gravel as the other came to join it. Her shoes were high-heeled, stylish, shiny, and apparently made of snakeskin.

Good move, thought Severus sarcastically, taking note of Lucius taking note. Lucius was an expert in decoding shoes.

She got smoothly out of the car, looking utterly perfect, and bestowed her trademark sunny smile on Lucius once more. Her severely-coiffed hair, a slightly unnatural but highly becoming shade of auburn, gave a note of colour to the grim November day.

"Mr Malfoy," said La Westwood. "What a pleasure to meet you again!" Her eyes swept across the facade of the Manor in a calculating fashion.

"Is it?" replied Lucius, surveying her in an equally assessing fashion which caused her to preen. His eyes moved to the underlings who were climbing out of the car, and then stopped as the four Muggles he expected to see were followed by one more.

This particular Muggle was female, about nine years of age, smartly dressed, carried an expensive-looking toy cat under its arm, and was the image of its mother. It skipped forward in a nauseatingly perky fashion.

"Hello! I'm Delia!" She smiled up at Lucius in a way Snape supposed she had been taught to think of as appealing.

Lucius gave her an expressionless look, which he transferred to the mother.

"I was sure you wouldn't mind if I brought Delia along she has a little cold, so I had to keep her away from school for the day. And in any case, as she's part of the target audience if you *are* going to open Malfoy Manor to the public, we could consider her an integral member of the team, couldn't we?" Snape had never before thought anyone could combine resemblance to both a shark and a fluffy kitten in one expression, but somehow Westwood managed it.

"Quite," said Lucius stiffly. "Shall we go in?"

Westwood smiled fondly as her daughter pushed ahead of him and bounded up the steps to get to the door first.

Lucius smiled suavely as the child bounced off the wards still in place at the open doorway and sat down hard.

She was unhurt, but the fat tears were not slow in coming. "Mummeeeeeee!"

Severus, bringing up the rear with Hermione, murmured, "You've had to put up with this all the way from London?"

"Even her flunkies want to exterminate the brat," she said. "It's going to be a long afternoon."

Lucius ushered them inside. The Muggles gawked at the impressive entrance hall, with its black-and-white marble floor and complex candelabra. The Malfoy portraits had all been variously bullied, cajoled and bribed into immobility for the occasion, but Hermione noted that every one of them wore the same bad smell expression. She could hardly blame them.

"Ooh! Mummy! Look at this!" said the Brat, grabbing an anatomically-precise porcelain figurine of a satyr.

"Miss Westwood, you should refrain from handling the items you see in this house," said Hermione firmly. "One does not touch other people's property without permission." She ignored the answering pout and the sharp look from the Brat's mother for her presumption in correcting the child. "Mr Snape, would you bring your colleagues in here, please?"

Aunt Emilia's salon, named for the forbidding portrait that dominated the room, was Snape's least favourite part of the Manor. It was a fact known to very few people only two, to be precise that his preference was for warm colours and clutter. Emilia Malfoy's taste had run to grey and gold with accents of green and black, and spindly, formal furnishings. It was the perfect room in which to receive unwanted visitors. Lucius had ensured that there had been no fire in the grate for three days, and the air was frigid. Hermione settled the inspectors in uncomfortable chairs, pointed 'Mr Snape' towards a nicer one, headed off the Brat's exploratory instincts by seating her at a window with a colourful book, then took station at Lucius' side.

"So, Mrs Westwood," he began, "what do you need to see, to accomplish your mission?"

She was undisturbed by his cool demeanour. Instead, she uncrossed and recrossed her elegant legs, smiling up at him from where she sat.

"Mr Malfoy as you will by now be well aware, if your assistant has been doing her job..."

Snakeskin shoes and now bitching about Hermione thought Severus. *Ooops.*

"...we shall be making an initial inspection today, to gauge the approximate taxable value of your property, should you decide ~~not~~ to go ahead with your plans for opening, and to assess the seriousness of your intentions to do so."

Lucius nodded at Hermione, who distributed the neat folders of plans and progress reports. The three of them had spent a busy couple of hours on Sunday afternoon setting up illusions of foundation digging for a state-of-the-art visitor centre and one or two other projects.

"Thank you. Should we feel you need any advice or assistance in your plans, I am empowered to bring in the experts from English Heritage."

Severus noticed that Hermione was glaring and turned to look. The Brat had taken to unravelling one of the heavy gold tassels on the curtain cords. Westwood also looked round.

"Don't do that, Sweetie," she said mildly.

The Brat ignored her mother and continued her fiddling without further admonishment, until the cords suddenly swirled themselves up out of reach. Snape gave her two minutes to find something else to destroy.

"Shall we begin, then?" invited Lucius.

*

It had eventually taken a Compulsion Charm to keep the little monster in its chair. Hermione didn't bother to be subtle about it.

"Did you just use... *magic* on my daughter?!" exclaimed Westwood, starting to her feet and filling the word with an unexpected degree of loathing.

"Yes, Mrs Westwood, I did. Your child has already damaged the curtain-cords, scored the surface of a polished table with her crayons, and, through sheer inattention, spilled hot chocolate on a valuable carpet. Thus far, her behaviour would be more suited to a zoo..." *as an inmate* was the clearly-understood omission "...than to a civilised house." She has also interrupted an important meeting several times."

"I dare say you have little experience of children, Miss Granger." *Nor are you likely to, you frumpy little bitch.*

"Enough to recognise bad behaviour, Mrs Westwood." *Especially on your part, in bringing her here and expecting us to lump it!* But I dare say she is just tired and fractious from being unwell." *My arse.* "I would like to reassure you that she will feel no ill-effects..." *unfortunately* "...from the spell I used, any more than she has from your obliging me to extend the geas to include her, so that she may understand us."

"Ladies," complained Lucius in his pose of bored aristocrat, "could we just get on with it? I'm sure we could all do with a walk, and we can't see the place until all this dull stuff has been discussed."

Hermione was secretly very disappointed that the inspectors had thought to bring wellies for the tour of the grounds. She had been looking forward to seeing them, especially Westwood in truth the others were pretty inoffensive struggle with the muddy paths. She herself settled for warming and dirt-repelling charms to protect her lovely boots.

While two of the HMRC juniors went off to view the estate as a whole with one of the gardening elves whose appearance caused no end of consternation among the Muggles, in particular the Brat, who had to whimper and attempt to cling to Lucius' hand the rest were taken on a tour of the areas closer to the house. Westwood cooed over the knot garden and admired the extensive kitchen gardens, though it was unusual, she said, to see so many poisonous plants in the herb beds this after shrieking loudly when Darling Delia started to pick the Lords-and-Ladies without anyone else apparently noticing. In the rose garden, she briefly rested a hand on Lucius' sleeve as she exclaimed over the beauty of the bushes, which were still in bloom so late in the year.

"Divorced from a rich husband and looking for another, I'd say," commented Severus *sotto voce* to Hermione.

"Bloody hell, yes!" said one of the junior inspectors, who had exceptionally good hearing. "And I bet she's got something on the boss, because she always gets this kind of job."

"She never brought the Bride of Chucky along with her before, though," said the other. "I don't suppose your boss has a very deep well somewhere on the property, does he, Miss Granger? I'm sure I could wangle a big rebate for that."

Hermione laughed, though she was beginning to worry about what was brewing when Lucius' nostrils went white at the vision of the Brat dancing up to her mother with a

ripped-off bunch of his prized black roses in her hands.

But, "Perhaps you'd like to have a go in the labyrinth, Miss Westwood," was all he said. "It's one of the best in England, and only very clever people have been able to reach the centre."

"Severus what's he got hiding in there?" Hermione hissed. "He said 'reach', not 'find'...! I really don't think we can get away with any fatal accidents today, you know."

"Mr Malfoy," said Severus, over the prattle of the Brat, "as we are beginning to lose the daylight, perhaps a view of the foundations and the first part of the adventure park would be a better idea. Mazes can be more... complicated... than one anticipates, from what I have heard."

"Spoilsport," mouthed Lucius.

"And Miss Westwood, perhaps you would pick up those flowers you have dropped before they are stepped on. It would be a shame to trample such priceless blooms."

The child scooped them up higgledy-piggledy.

"I don't want to carry them! They're prickly!"

"Let me take them, then," said Hermione, holding out her hand. The flowers were roughly thrown at her and the Brat skipped off after her mother, who had spotted the glasshouses.

Hermione sucked at her hand where a thorn had caught her. "Ouch."

"I swear I'll..."

"Lucius no. She's not worth the risk of imprisonment," Hermione said round her thumb. "Let me do it I'd probably get a fairly short sentence for a first offence."

The greenhouses were steamy-hot. While Hermione's hair seized took the opportunity to frizz to monstrous proportions, she was pleased to see Westwood's coiffure begin to look limp, though the woman compensated by loosening her coat and suit jacket sufficiently to display a long and elegant neck. This she presented to advantage, looking slightly sideways up at Lucius.

"Why, Mr Malfoy, what an amazing abundance of fantastic plants! You will take the horticultural world by storm when this becomes public!" She cupped her hand sensuously around a peach and bent her head to inhale its perfume.

Lucius, however, was not to be moved.

"Would you kindly dissuade your daughter from gorging on the apricots, madam? They are being grown for a special occasion."

She laughed prettily.

"Aren't children a trial? Delia, darling! You'll spoil your tea if you carry on. Now do come here and be a good girl!"

The Brat pocketed a couple more of the fruit before joining her mother. She ignored Lucius.

"Where are the exciting plants, Mummy?" she whined. "These are dull."

"We have some exotica through here, if you enjoy that sort of thing," invited the master of the house.

Unfortunately, the Brat had enough sense to keep her fingers and head out of the Titan fly-trap, and she noticed the writhing of the Venomous Tentacula before getting too close to make the observation academic. She was, however, very much drawn to the pretty markings on the giant Bornean pitcher plant, which had been discovered and brought back by Lucius' grandfather. Severus had always thought of it as the Dustbin Plant, such was its size and indiscriminating appetite and indeed, it was at that moment shaking with the struggles of its latest meal. The Brat strode fearlessly up to it and poked it hard.

"Cool!" she said. "What does it eat?"

Lucius looked at the cuddly toy which was still firmly clamped beneath her arm.

"Kittens," he replied. "Shall we go and see the new foundations now?"

*

Returning to the house at dusk, they passed through the stable yard. Severus wondered whether Lucius had deliberately arranged the demise of the last peacock for the occasion. Certainly, the enthusiastic crunching noises the dogs were making had an effect on the visitors which he seemed to find most gratifying, particularly when one of them got up to sniff at Westwood with a bloody muzzle. It sneezed at her perfume, spraying both her and the Brat with droplets of gore.

"Sweet dog," murmured Lucius, caressing its ears.

By the time the whole party reassembled in the house, Westwood was evidently planning some swingeing tax impositions, house opening or no house opening. She and the Brat both refused Hermione's offer of a Cleaning Charm.

"I don't believe you're magic!" said the Brat. She pulled a crayon out of her pocket and brandished it in Hermione's and Lucius' faces. "Hokey pokey! Abracadabra! You're just mean and I wish I could turn you into frogs and squash you!"

She threw the crayon on the floor and stamped off.

"Charming," said Severus. "Mrs Westwood, unless you have any further questions for Mr Malfoy, I think we might return to London now. If anything else comes up, I am sure Miss Granger will be available to answer any questions and provide assistance. I will be able to contact you easily, Miss Granger?"

"Of course, Mr Snape, Mrs Westwood. I can let you have a Muggle telephone number with an answering service. I check it every day, so there should be no difficulties." She turned towards the junior inspectors. "Gentlemen I hope you have seen everything you need to on this visit? Then I am sure the Ministry driver will be happy to take you back to London in warmth and comfort. Refreshments will be available in the car." Her smile just failed to include their superior, to whom she now offered her hand. "I'll wish you a good trip back, then..."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the Brat sidling up to a particularly fine Chinese vase, hand extended.

"Oh, no!"

It was the last straw for Lucius.

Everything seemed to happen at once.

The Brat, with a smug smile, sent the vase crashing to the floor. The veneer of civility, which had worn very thin, fell away from Lucius' enraged snarl. His wand was in his

hand.

"No!" shouted Severus, already on the move but too far away to intervene.

Hermione threw herself forward.

She crumpled to the ground as the hex took her full force.

*

There was a moment of silence before pandemonium broke out.

The Brat dashed into its mother's embrace, from where it sobbed over-dramatically that the bad man was scary and wanted to hurt her. Westwood, ignoring the fallen woman near her on the floor, began to shout imprecations about assault, and lawyers, and damages. One of the other Muggles, clearly embarrassed, knelt down where Lucius had thrown himself onto the cold marble and was cradling Hermione in his arms.

"Sir? I know some first-aid. Perhaps I can help make her comfortable while we wait for an ambulance?"

Severus was there too, reaching for Hermione, but his hand stilled when he saw Lucius' twisted expression.

"Severus get them out of here. Oblivate them."

"Obliterate us? What the...? You! You're one of *them*!" screeched Westwood.

"Petrificus totalus!" shouted Lucius, with a sweeping motion of his wand arm that took all of them in. "Severus get rid of them, and make sure they remember none of this." He took a deep breath. "See that this young man is rewarded somehow, will you?"

Still holding Hermione closely, he got to his feet and turned away.

"I will see to her. She'll be all right."

"She had better be, Lucius. She had better be."

*

Hermione surfaced painfully, becoming aware that she was cradled against someone's chest and shoulder. A soothing voice was murmuring to her, a voice she knew one she liked. She opened her eyes and looked groggily up at... Lucius. What was she doing in Lucius' arms? She frowned, which was not a good idea, as it made her head hurt even more. She whimpered a little, and was gently rocked.

"Hush. You're safe," he murmured to her.

"Lucius?"

"Forgive me, Hermione."

"What happened?"

"It was a Stunner, just a Stunner. You and your asinine Gryffindor heroics."

He pressed his lips to her forehead, smoothing away her renewed frown.

"You... you tried to hex a child. A *child*." She laughed shakily. "Even if there was provocation..."

A cough racked her, and when she could breathe again, she found she was once more pressed against Lucius' racing heart. It seemed a good place to rest. He drew back a little and looked at her.

"That you should have been injured again in my house, when I promised you safety. It's unforgiveable."

"Lucius, don't apologise. It's out of character." She smiled tiredly. "Just don't do it again."

She was a little surprised when he briefly touched his lips to hers before laying her back against the sofa cushions.

"Rest now."

*

When she woke again, feeling somewhat stronger, it was to the sound of shouting outside the door. The words were indistinct, but she knew the sound of a bitter row when she heard it. She sat up and gingerly swung her feet to the floor. Her muscles still twitched an angry Lucius cast a powerful hex but she was unharmed apart from the bruises gained by falling. She bent forward, elbows on knees and forehead cradled in her palms, listening unhappily to Severus arguing with his friend. The door handle was turned, and through the widening gap, their words were audible.

"You couldn't let it lie, could you?" Severus snapped. "You have to get so damn shirty about every little thing..."

"This day has been one long insult from start to finish! How could I let it pass? Tell me that how could I?"

"Very easily. You and your precious Malfoy pride. Pah! It's quite easy to live with insults, Lucius I should know. You just learn to swallow it..."

"Swallow *all that*? From *them*?"

"Yes swallow it. And wait for the right moment. I thought you were a Slytherin."

"You should have let me deal with this my way from the very beginning instead of tiptoeing around kowtowing to the whims of an idiot and a Muggle!"

"Oh, yes *your way*. And what a good way you've just proved that to be, with Hermione injured and me having to clear up your mess as usual."

"Stop it!" Hermione whispered into her hands. "Stop it. Stop it."

Severus had come fully into the room, and swiftly crossed to Hermione. He sat next to her and drew her to his side. Lucius followed. He stood before them, looking haggard. Hermione raised a tear-stained face.

"Severus, I want to go home and rest now."

"Of course."

"And Lucius? You're right. We should never have let things get this far. We've all been having fun messing about and trying to duck out of things, but it's no good. There's another way I know there is without resorting to violence. Some way with no mess to clear up. But..." She sighed. "I'm too tired."

Severus helped her to her feet.

"No it's all right. I'll manage the Floo by myself. Just one thing," she added. "Don't fight while I'm gone. Not over this mess, and certainly not over me. You are friends. If I have learned nothing else over the past weeks, I have learned that. Now use it pool your energies. I'll be in touch soon."

And with a hug for Lucius and a kiss for Severus, she was gone.

*

For a little while, silence prevailed in the room.

"We don't deserve that young woman, you know," said Lucius, finally.

"Now he learns humility...."

*

Author Note:

b>Lords-and-Ladies (*Arum maculatum*), bears highly poisonous, bright red berries. It seems the sort of thing that might be found in any decent potioneer's garden....

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arum_maculatum

Ten

Chapter 10 of 12

The Prime Minister needs money. It strikes him that he knows where there may be some to be found. Severus and Hermione join forces to thwart him and to protect Lucius Malfoy, who has the most to lose.

Voldemort Plus Ten: 2008

The Place: Hermione's flat; Number Ten, Downing Street

The time: Wednesday to Friday

"Thirty-six hours' uninterrupted sleep will generally see off the effects of a Stunning spell on a young, healthy, adult body." [Theophilus Twinge, *Symptoms and Treatment of Basic Curse Damage*, Penn and Scribble 1952, p. 247.]

Hermione barely made it through the Floo, staggering into her living room and stumbling against the coffee table. Wanting nothing more than to be alone after the day's disasters, she disconnected her fireplace from the network. Hopefully, Severus would understand her need for solitude. A few deep breaths, a lurch to the kitchen to fill a plastic bottle with tap water to put by the bed, one more lurch, a quick strip, a crawl under the duvet, and an instantaneous descent into darkness were all she knew until Wednesday morning.

The fact that it was Wednesday didn't really dawn on her until after she had seen to her bursting bladder and craving for coffee. Then, after a trip downstairs to collect her mail and the morning papers, she settled into her armchair with a second mug of coffee and John Humphrys carping mellifluously at some financial expert or other. She applauded mentally as he told off his interviewee for using the word "dialogue" as a verb, and opened up the *Guardian* to start her daily perusal of the country's disasters. Half-way down her mug and the second page, the date finally registered. Oh, bugger. A whole day gone; nobody at the Ministry any the wiser where she was; Severus getting stropky with all and sundry, no doubt; and Lucius.... Better not think about Lucius just yet. Not quite strong enough for that. Definitely a third-cup issue that one.

She began to open her post.

Water bill pretty much as expected. Electricity bill bloody hell! Gas bill Merlin and all the Sleepers! How was it even possible to spend that much on heating one small flat? She checked the tariffs: there had been a twenty per cent price hike. No wonder the papers screamed about it constantly. The next was an unbeatable subscription offer to *The Economist*, followed by another for *The New Statesman*. She was subsequently informed that she had reached the final stages of a wonderful prize draw, and then a colourful catalogue besought her to buy all sorts of cunning gadgets she couldn't possibly live without. *So why aren't I dead yet?* she thought, adding it to the pile on the floor. And finally, there was a hand-delivered letter bearing her name in familiar, spiky handwriting.

Hermione felt a rush of affection as she opened the envelope. To know that he had been close but had the delicacy not to intrude was a wonderful thing. Of course, he was a Slytherin and she had been completely blotto, so for all she knew he'd been cartwheeling around her flat in a pink tutu (no it would have to have been green), but the fact that he had left no traces was very touching. In a rush of girly romanticism, Hermione raised the letter to her face and breathed in. It smelt of... paper.

"Hermione,

I've told Arthur you have the 'flu and are staying at home for at least a week. We trust you are feeling better now. I will know when this letter has been opened, so you can expect us to arrive in an hour or so.

Yours,

Severus."

Well, not many lines to read between, there a characteristically Snapean missive, full of care and devoid of its expression. Kind of him to keep Arthur off her back, and very

considerate to give her enough time to get her clothes on. Her eyes rested on that "we", though. What did that mean? Evidently, he and Lucius were still on speaking terms, which was good. They had been discussing her whether that was good or not remained to be seen. They would be arriving together, and that sent her into a bit of a panic.

She had deliberately avoided thinking about what had taken place between herself and Lucius. A few snippets of some pleasant dreams remained from her long sleep, sufficient to make her uncomfortable about seeing him again, but she was a woman with a disciplined mind, and she could certainly discipline herself to duck an issue when necessary.

Yet she couldn't deny the tremor of excitement she felt each time he did intrude on her thoughts. Nor the swiftly-following flash of guilt. "Enough!" She told her image in the bathroom mirror. "It was a moment's affection between friends, that's all. It's quite all right to think he's pretty, because he *is* pretty. I love Severus, and heaven knows I lust after him but I still have eyes in my head, so I might as well enjoy using them. There. Sorted."

So when they finally arrived, and she could detect nothing amiss between them, she was able to greet Lucius with tolerable composure after throwing herself at Severus in a manner he chastised as 'undignified' and 'juvenile' while taking full advantage.

Having settled her guests with tea and crumpets as a buffer against the foul day that was chucking horizontal sleet at her windows, Hermione pushed aside their queries about her health too many potentially tricky lines of conversation there and adopted what they already privately called her McGonagall manner:

"So, what's the fallout from Monday's debacle?"

"Nothing at all," Severus replied rather smugly. "As far as our guests are concerned, the Ministry car broke down in the middle of nowhere and help failed to arrive until well after dark. They never reached the Manor, and the appointment will have to be re-scheduled."

"I had no idea you were so adept at memory charms, dear boy," said Lucius.

"I'm not, beyond rough patch-up jobs. I left it to Johnson, the driver. Department of Mysteries," he added for Hermione's benefit. "It seems Arthur is re-learning a little caution, belatedly."

"And while I've been snoring, have you two come up with any nice, shiny ideas with which to distract our revered PM?" she inquired.

They exchanged a glance.

"Well, how about this one?" said Lucius. He wiped the butter fastidiously from his lips before continuing. "We engineer some sort of natural-looking catastrophe. The PM, throwing all his analytical and organisational acumen into serving the country's needs, saves the day, because we will of course ensure that everything he does is successful."

"Well," said Hermione dubiously, "it's got style, I suppose. And by natural-looking, you would be thinking of....?"

"Dragons, floods, earthquakes, that sort of thing."

"You do have flair, Lucius, I'll give you that, but... I think we'd be better going for something a little less dramatic."

Lucius pouted charmingly. He could cope with accusations of style and flair.

"For one thing, disasters, natural or not, tend to get out of hand rather quickly the risk of collateral damage is too great," she explained gently, choosing to ignore his indifferent shrug. "And in any case, our PM, though I'm sure he possesses many sterling qualities, could make even the most outrageous acts of heroism look dour and boring. It just won't wash, I'm afraid. What else have you got?"

It was Severus' turn.

"We did wonder briefly about having some far-reaching terrorist plot exposed, but that would probably end up in a tail-spin of accusations as a result of the government having let it get so far."

Hermione nodded.

"So then we wondered about getting the goblins involved in order to engineer a smooth transition into the Euro..."

"Good grief, NO!" she said, horrified. "Little England would throw a fit!"

"Well, that's it for the moment."

"That's it?"

"I still like the dragons, or a volcano going off in Milton Keynes," said Lucius.

Hermione shivered and wrapped her fingers round her mug.

"Why don't you turn the heating up?" Severus chided, pulling her close.

"What and miss this? Besides," she added, "I've just had the most humongous... power... bill..." She ground to a halt, staring at them in turn.

"Look!" she squeaked, scrabbling on the floor for her discarded mail. She spread out her bills on the coffee table, and then grabbed the newspapers.

"Look!" she repeated excitedly. "It's staring us right in the face! And all we need to do now is figure out exactly how to do it!"

*

The Prime Minister was in no very friendly mood as he and Mr Snape waited for the wizarding delegation to arrive. He wasn't getting any more popular with the passing days, the stupid pranks these magicians kept pulling were seriously getting on his nerves, and on top of it all, he thought he might be developing an ulcer. He wanted those taxes sorted, and he wanted them sorted now.

Arthur Weasley led the way, looking serious and magisterial. He had chosen to don his Wizengamot robe (minus the very silly hat) for the occasion. Miss Granger followed him, and lastly the Malfoy fellow stepped through the fireplace, an annoying little smile playing on his lips. They took their places at the meeting table.

The PM leaned forward threateningly.

"Well?" he demanded of Arthur. "What do you have for me?"

"Prime Minister," said the Granger girl, "before I tell you what we might be able to offer, I want you to answer a simple question."

"I'm not playing any more of your games, Miss Granger," he growled.

"No games, sir. Just a question it is of material import."

"Very well."

"Bear in mind that I want a completely honest answer," she admonished.

"Just get on with it!"

"Do you enjoy your job, sir?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Do you enjoy your job?" she repeated.

The PM cast a puzzled glance at Weasley, who was sitting back, apparently content that Miss Granger should take the lead.

"Well, it's an important role the country needs responsible guidance..."

"That's not what I asked, Prime Minister. Do you enjoy your job?"

God, the woman was relentless.

"I... well...", he sighed. "In truth? No, Miss Granger. Not one jot. Now tell me what this has to do with the price of eggs."

"Actually, it has more to do with the price of what you use to cook those eggs, sir."

"I don't follow."

"How would you like it, sir, if in return for dropping your absurd notion about taxing the wizarding community, we were to offer you a way to see out your remaining two years of office a popular man, one who has done something of material benefit to every citizen of this country? You would leave Number Ten in a blaze of glory, able to hand over the reins to your successor at the head of a party renewed in vigour and ideological credibility, blah, blah, blah. Depending, of course, on how skilfully you present all this."

"Leave, Miss Granger?"

"Oh, yes, sir. We couldn't possibly allow you to remain, knowing as much about us as you do, because you might be tempted to do something foolish again. But if, as you say, you do not enjoy your job and to be frank, it looks as though it's killing you then leaving should be no hardship."

"I feel as though you are trying to back me into a corner, Miss Granger. It's not a feeling I appreciate."

"Of course I am. But listen "

She drew a deep breath.

"What is the one thing that nearly everyone in this country is worrying about, from big businesses to individuals in bedsitters? The one thing every newspaper complains about, regardless of how its editor votes?"

He thought.

"Why energy costs. But we've been arguing that one in circles in the Commons until we're blue in the face."

"I know. Because you want to build more nuclear power stations so the country is less reliant on foreign oil and gas, and because they're 'clean' except for the fact that they aren't."

The PM kneaded his tired and doughy face.

"And what exactly can you offer me?"

"How about *really* clean energy?"

"How is that possible? I can't litter the whole country with wind turbines, and tidal power and all the other things take time to build and integrate, quite apart from the fact that they are insufficient to our energy needs."

"Mr Snape," said Miss Granger as if she were asking for the time of day, "did you bring the geiger counter?"

The Prime Minister leapt to his feet.

"Just a minute! What's going on here? Why do you need a...? Snape! *You're* in on this?" He rounded on his unperturbed aide. "You you're one of *them*! I I I "

"I'm amazed it has taken you this long to work it out," replied Snape blandly. "Don't worry, man! I'm no more likely to hex you now than I was yesterday. Sit down and listen."

"Thank you, Mr Snape," said Granger warmly, taking the machine from him. "Now, Mr Malfoy, the case, please?"

Malfoy picked up a small case that he had set on the carpet by his feet. He handed it over rather ceremonially.

"Before we continue, would you please demonstrate what we mean by Transfiguration, Mr Malfoy?"

Lucius, with his most charmingly sarcastic smile, Summoned a rather ugly ornament from the mantelpiece. He placed it in the centre of the table and trained his wand on it.

"Prime Minister," he said, "watch closely. This is what we like to call 'magic'."

The PM was in the process of training a dirty look on the blond popinjay when his attention was attracted by what was happening to the ornament. Before his eyes, it transformed slowly into a delicate crystal vase, thence into a mouse, followed by a teacup and saucer, then a shotgun, and then.... With increasing rapidity, Malfoy rang the changes, until he returned the object to its original gilt-bronze form.

"I rather liked the vase, didn't you?" said Malfoy consideringly.

"Oh, yes," said Weasley, speaking for the first time. "Allow me." And he flicked his wand.

"I preferred the marquetry box," said Hermione. *Flick*

"And I think the PM needs a drink," finished Snape, Transfiguring it into a bottle of Old Ogden's and conjuring a glass. "Try this you'll find it gets easier after a drink or two."

"And you can all do this?" gasped the PM, once his coughing had subsided. He took another gulp to buffer him against the answer, and found it went down rather more easily the second time.

"Yes, all of us, with varying degrees of skill," answered Malfoy. "I am, of course, the best."

"Thank you, Mr Malfoy," said Granger repressively. "Now to the meat of the matter."

She straightened the case in front of her.

"The problem with nuclear power is the management of its waste, is it not?"

The PM nodded slowly.

"So what if we were to eliminate that problem?"

She opened the box. In it sat an undistinguished-looking lump.

"This is a piece of highly-radioactive nuclear waste," she said in what the PM considered to be entirely too blasé a tone. He himself was at the far end of the room before she had finished the sentence.

"Oh don't worry!" she smiled. "It's inside a Containment Charm. Mr Snape, the geiger counter, please?"

She appeared to be having fun. The machine was silent as it passed over the lump.

"Now, Prime Minister, we will protect ourselves and you with further Charms, so we may demonstrate that we are not cheating."

There was a little hocus-pocus and a cool sensation. Then Weasley waved his wand at the lump and the geiger counter went wild for a moment before Weasley did whatever-it-was again. The PM retained sufficient aplomb to direct an ironic look at Miss Granger, who despite her own assurances had backed away. She shrugged.

"Too much Muggle in my background, I suppose," she said. "And now if you would, Mr Malfoy?"

Weasley waved his wand once more, but the geiger counter barely squeaked before Malfoy transformed the lump into a... lump. Of a slightly different hue. And no apparent radioactivity at all.

All four wizards turned their eyes to the Prime Minister.

"Well?" drawled Malfoy. "Do we have a deal?"

*

It took several hours of discussion to hammer out the details. Malfoy Enterprises would lease the government its revolutionary new 'technology' for treating nuclear waste in effect, wizards who would be paid rather well for a few hours' basic Transfiguration once a week under conditions of the strictest secrecy. After demonstrating its effectiveness by beginning the conversion of waste already stored at Sellafield, the 'technology' would be a major new plank in the policy of constructing several new power stations conveniently sited in depressed areas in the country, thus creating employment. There was a strong prospect that the government could then, in conjunction with Malfoy Enterprises, raise additional revenue by licensing the technology to other countries.

As an addendum, the Maiden Castle Accords were to be set down on parchment, signed by both Ministers, and magically bound.

The PM was reluctantly impressed with the team which confronted him the combination of Granger's tenacity, Weasley's persuasiveness, Snape's subtlety, and Malfoy's insouciant flair (the velvet glove round the... whatever it was inside, it was scary), really amounted to an attack he couldn't have repulsed even had he wanted to. She was right it really was too good to refuse. He abandoned his original plans and shook hands all round.

So here he was, exhausted at his desk in the early hours once again, but with hope in his heart and the prospect of retirement in two years' time. Life was looking good at last.

Snape came in bearing some files, as he so often did.

"So, all this time, you've been spying on me?" said the PM.

"No hardly at all, really," he replied, leafing through the in-tray. "We have other people to do that sort of thing."

"So why *are* you here?"

Snape stared at him for a moment, then pulled up a chair.

"Do you really want to know?" he asked. "Perhaps it might be a good idea to tell you, because then you will understand just how lucky you have been to stumble upon the wizarding community now, and not ten or eleven years ago."

*

Severus didn't return to Hermione's flat until after three in the morning. He expected to find her asleep, but was pleasantly surprised to find that she was awake and waiting for him. He was also pleased to see Lucius there, the pair of them arguing equably over a backgammon board.

"You ought to be playing her at chess, Lucius!" he commented, pulling off his tie and undoing a button or two.

"That's hardly fair," she complained. "You know I'm pants at chess, and *he* insists on playing for forfeits."

"Whereas, you, my dear, have the devil's own luck at dice, it seems. I've already had to promise you the Crown Jewels and all the bears in Russia."

"Oh, you can talk I owe you twelve adoring virgins and Fort Knox, so fair's fair!"

"Well, Severus, is it finished? Will he leave us alone now?"

"He will. Gods, I'm tired." He toed off his shoes and stretched out his feet towards the electric fire.

"Don't go to sleep yet, Severus. I've got some champagne in the fridge," said Hermione. "We have to celebrate!"

As they raised their glasses to drink to their success, Lucius forestalled them.

"What is it?" said Severus with a touch of irritation.

"I think that we are drinking to the wrong thing," Lucius said. "Success over Muggles, one way or another, is pretty much a given, and not really worth wasting what seems

to be a very good vintage. You do us proud, Hermione," he added with a sweet smile in her direction. "No I suggest that we drink to something far more valuable. To the three of us. We work well together, do we not?"

Severus met his friend's eyes and clearly read his meaning. He raised his glass to his lips.

"Indeed we do."

*

Author notes:

1."Little England" is a term which can be used to describe the conservative, patriotic, insular and often often vociferous section of British society which seems to view change in any form as a Bad Thing.

2.**Sellafield** is a large nuclear reprocessing plant in Cumbria. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sellafield>

3.John Humphrys is a presenter of the Today Programme, the news and current affairs flagship of BBC Radio 4. He did actually berate an interviewee for using "dialogue" as a verb recently. And he has a lurvely voice.

Eleven

Chapter 11 of 12

The Prime Minister needs money. It strikes him that he knows where there may be some to be found. Severus and Hermione join forces to thwart him and to protect Lucius Malfoy, who has the most to lose.

Voldemort plus ten: 2008

The time: Saturday morning and the period up to Christmas

The Place: everywhere, but starting at Hermione's flat

Hermione watched Severus sleep. As he so often did, he had pushed his pillows off the bed and lay splayed out on his stomach, his hair unbound and all over the place. She wound a lock of it around her finger, gently, to avoid waking him. It was thick, coarse and straight, almost like a horse's tail. In fact, she thought, with the wrong shampoo and a following wind, he'd probably look like a Thelwell pony. She loved his hair. He sighed and shifted but settled again into immobility, so she got up and left him to sleep.

"Morning, Lucius," she said as she went to the bathroom.

Lucius was sitting with a cup of tea and a book, elegant bare feet crossed on the coffee table.

"Good morning, Hermione," he replied when she emerged. "Shall I make you some tea?"

"Thanks, but I think I'll have coffee," she said.

It struck her, while she was filling the cafetiere, that she had just had the most ridiculously banal exchange with Lucius Malfoy, of all people, and that it had felt entirely normal to find him, ex-Death Eater and ex-all-round nemesis #2, drinking tea in her armchair early on a Saturday morning. And her bed was occupied by her ex-professor, ex-bane-of-existence, Severus Snape. How life had changed in a mere few weeks. What, she wondered, had become of the Hermione Granger, ex-sidekick-of-Potter-and-Weasley, that she had been.

She sat down at the kitchen window and stared unseeing at the chilly day outside. "And what now?"

She didn't realise at first that she had spoken the thought aloud.

"What now, indeed," said Lucius from the doorway. "Well, there will be some work involved in setting up the business for your Prime Minister, and the three of us still have to liberate the Duchess, which won't be all that easy if you insist on our leaving no trace "

"I do."

"We haven't left all the fun behind, you know," he continued, pulling the other chair to the little table and seating himself. Their knees brushed. "This is really a very small space you inhabit, Hermione."

"Yes, but it's mine."

"Just like Severus he won't get rid of Spinner's End, even though he barely sets foot in the place. Where is he, by the way?"

"Still asleep. He was exhausted last night. I'm still too hyped to need much myself, yet."

"It's a remarkable show of trust, you know, that he should sleep so deeply in your presence, and without setting any protections."

"And in yours," she replied.

"It took him years, you know." Lucius sighed. "But I shouldn't be surprised, really. After all, it would be a sorry day for the Malfoys when a friend could feel secure in my house. Do *you* trust me, Hermione?"

"Of course I don't, Lucius," she deadpanned, rather taken aback to find that she was lying.

"Thank you, my dear," he said. "You do reassure me. Now, let us crank up your computer and continue our investigation of Muggle security systems."

*

"I think using a general burst of magic to sabotage the electronics is the best way to go," Hermione was arguing. "It'll look like a power cut, and it will give us a good few minutes' leeway to effect the swap."

They were heads together staring at the computer screen, Lucius' arm draped across the back of Hermione's chair, when Severus walked blearily into the kitchen. He stopped to watch for a minute before making his presence known. It was odd, he thought, that he should feel neither the jealous rage of his youth nor the cold contempt of later years, but instead a warm pleasure that the two people he cared for apparently liked each other.

"Look," she continued, lifting Lucius' hand off the mouse so she could take charge of it. "Given the placement of the staff quarters, it would take the quickest of them about six minutes to get there, and that's assuming they think an intruder is after the Duchess and not some of the more portable items."

"Why not just send everyone to sleep and use Disillusionment to fool the cameras?" asked Lucius.

"What, and ruin my James Bond moment?"

"Actually, you both have a point," Severus interjected.

"Good afternoon," said Lucius.

"Ha very funny," he replied, reaching for a mug and the coffee pot. "Hermione, I've told you about assaulting me when I'm carrying hot liquids."

"What do you mean?" she said, adding, "About us both having a point."

"Making sure the staff don't wake inopportunistically will be necessary. There looks to be an emergency power supply for the security systems which will almost certainly set off the alarms, and I am not convinced that six minutes will be sufficient time for us to effect the exchange. And effecting the exchange will necessitate the use of magic, so the security systems are definitely going to go haywire. We should remember to make sure that there is a major glitch in the electricity supply to the whole area if it is not to look as though there's been some funny business." He took a mouthful of coffee, grimacing. "Hermione, why can't you be thoroughly English and drink tea in the morning? But to continue, Hermione is absolutely right about leaving no trace at all – remember the PM is now alert to us, and besides which, there are certain people in the Auror section who would jump at the flimsiest excuse to flay you alive, Lucius, and probably wouldn't say no to having a go at me."

"And we must think about how devastated our Hermione would be if anything happened to us, wouldn't you, my dear?"

"No, it's quite all right, Lucius. I've already forged both of your wills in my favour."

"Slytherin wench! Snape, we did it – we finally corrupted a Gryffindor!"

"Is there no end to our brilliance, Malfoy?"

"Oooh, you are awful!" giggled Hermione.

"But you like us," Severus said, ruffling her hair. "Now, get out of the kitchen, the pair of you, and let me cook breakfast."

*

The pile of papers on Arthur's desk never seemed to get any smaller, though Hermione found she was less obsessive about clearing it each day than she had been. She resettled the quill she was using to hold her hair in its untidy bun and deposited the papers that were ready for the Minister's signature. A quick glance at the diary confirmed that he was due back from the Wizengamot session in twenty minutes, which gave her time to whizz through the latest press releases before doling out his next batch of tasks. Life as the Minister's aide had become much easier as a result of the recent crisis, and she had no intention of letting him slip back into his old ways.

"Anything new from the PM's office, Matthew?" she asked the portrait of the frog-faced little man. She looked a little closer. "You don't look well, you know. What's up?"

"Boat race with the nymphs downstairs last night," he said, collapsing into his uncomfortable-looking chair. "Merlin's balls, but those girls can drink! Let me sleep, woman! And no, nothing new." He pulled his wig down over his eyes and began to snore gently.

The clock ticked, the fire crackled, and the quiet was punctuated by Matthew's grunts. Towards the end of the afternoon, there were generally few if any visitors to the Minister's office, so Hermione kicked off her shoes and curled into one of the large armchairs with her work. She forced herself to concentrate on honing the plausibility of the half-truths she was preparing for the *Prophet*, but her heart wasn't really in it. Two weeks back working full-time at the Ministry, and the one thing she was absolutely sure about with regard to her job was that she didn't want to do it any more. But what else could she do that would guarantee her freedom from boredom and distance from the stranglehold the Ministry had on her life? As yet, she didn't know, but whatever it was, she was determined to find it soon. She glanced at the clock and frowned. Arthur was late, and she had to speak to him before leaving for the evening. What she really wanted to be doing was working on the arithmantic component of the reproduction of properly-aged pigments in the forged painting.

She was just getting more creative with the truth than was her habit (*in keeping bad company*, she thought wryly) when Arthur finally walked through the door. He looked a little frazzled.

"Ah, Hermione – there's something I want your opinion on, if you don't mind," he said.

"Will it take long? We need to prioritise the week's tasks, and I have to get going," she replied, slipping her shoes back on and standing.

"Seeing Severus? Funny that you two should have become so close..." Arthur hurriedly switched off his avuncular mode in the face of her frown. "No, not long. I just want your opinion about something that came up in the Chamber today."

"Go on," said Hermione, knocking her papers into a neat stack on the desk.

"It's just that, well, seeing Malfoy after all this time, and thinking about things that have happened, and, well..."

"Yes, Arthur?"

"Well, the Wizengamot doesn't like it much, but it's ten years since You-Know-Who was killed, and it feels like a milestone to me." He looked at her, seeking agreement. "And, well, I think that the Ministry ought to invite everyone who isn't actually in Azkaban to the V10 Yuletide ball – an amnesty, if you like, or a sign that we've moved on."

"Not that we have," said Hermione, thinking of how Lucius continued to be ostracised, and Severus barely accepted.

"You're right, of course," Arthur sighed. "But if we make the gesture, perhaps it'll get things moving in the right direction. What do you think, Hermione?"

She considered it for a moment.

"You're a good man, Arthur, and I think it's a good idea. Mind you, I don't know how many of the people who did well under Voldemort will come, and it might make for a tricky atmosphere, but if you really want my opinion, it ought to be attempted. Not that the Wizengamot will listen to me."

"They don't have to," said Arthur, taking his place at the desk. "In certain matters, I have the power to ride roughshod over them."

"It's certainly something that ought to be done on a regular basis," she said wryly. "I've been a bit hard on you lately, haven't I, Arthur?"

He squeezed her hand.

"You've changed, Hermione. Since taking up with Severus and spending time with Malfoy, you've changed, and it worries me, you know."

She squeezed back, before pulling up her own chair.

"I haven't changed. I've just got fed up with pretending to be something I'm not, with accepting the role that's been thrust upon me. And, just to give you a little warning you know that question I asked the PM? I've been asking it of myself a lot lately, and I keep getting the same answer he gave. Just thought you ought to know," she finished, feeling a little guilty.

"I can't say I'm surprised," sighed Arthur. "Though I wish you could have found it out in other company people more suited to you. Now, let's get through this quickly. I'd better get my money's worth while you're still here."

*

People more suited to me The thought came back to Hermione a few days later, as she found herself in the middle of another row with Lucius. Once again, they had been making good progress with reproducing Rubens' pigments when Lucius lost his temper over a failure to correctly integrate her formulae and Severus' concoctions into the final Transfiguration. She had been working quietly on the next set of calculations, and analysing some flakes of paint. One part of the Transfiguration Room at the Manor was set aside for her and equipped with a comfortable desk and chair, good lighting, and bookshelves which were magically connected with the library so that she might change her selection without making the long trek there and back. It was a good place to work, and Lucius was an ideal study companion, quiet when necessary, available for discussion when he was not too absorbed in his own part of the endeavour, and generally good company. With Severus much occupied either in the Potions laboratory in the basement or with his duties at Number Ten, she was thrown together with him a good deal, which she found far from disagreeable.

Apart from sometimes.

Lucius did, after all, have an unpredictable and explosive temper. And it really, really got on her wick when he lost it just as she was coming to the most delicate parts of a complex problem, and made her lose the thread completely.

Hermione was also possessed of a temper, and little by little, Lucius was bringing it out of her.

Which was why, that particular evening, they were both yelling as loudly as they could, right into each other's faces. Eventually, they had to draw breath, and Hermione realised that Lucius was very close to her indeed. She was suddenly very conscious that she could feel his breath on her lips. And with her own consciousness of the fact came a change in his expression that made her want to step back, but she was already too near to her table to allow it.

She swallowed.

"Back off, Lucius," she said. "I'm going to go and work somewhere else until you can learn not to explode over every little setback."

"I don't think I want you to do that," he said, not moving. His gaze dropped to her mouth.

"Don't!" she said. "Don't even *think* about it. Now is not the time." *Oh, shit where did that come from?*

"And when will be the time, Hermione?" he enquired.

"Don't hold your breath."

"Perish the thought," he replied, leaning infinitesimally closer to her.

She let loose a stinging hex just as Severus entered the room.

"What's going on here?" he said, frowning. "Lucius, are you annoying Hermione?"

"Just a little game, Severus. I promised Hermione that she could only have a kiss if she could land five curses, that's all."

"Oh! You... you... utter *twat!*" she gasped, rapidly landing three more stingers and another hex that he couldn't immediately identify, before slamming out of the room.

Severus gave Lucius a suspicious glare, the effect somewhat mitigated by what seemed to be an uncontrollable twitch of the lips.

"I suggest you tell me exactly what has been going on, and do it right now, before I feel obliged to add to the collection of welts Hermione has given you."

"She won't thank you for fighting her fights, you know," said Lucius, licking at the sore spot on the back of his hand. "Oh, stop looming, man it's nothing at all."

Severus hitched himself up onto Hermione's desk and pointed Lucius to the chair, where he made himself comfortable, legs extended before him and ankles crossed.

"So spill the beans. I thought you had too much respect for her to try the sort of cheap tricks I interrupted just now."

Lucius eyed the wand that was casually trained on his heart.

"Indeed I do." He raised a fingertip to delicately redirect the weapon. It moved unwaveringly back. "Oh, stop being all alpha-male at me, dear boy. I taught you the trick and I'm even better at it than you. And you can forget the eyebrow thing, too, since I watched you spend hours in front of a mirror holding the other one down when you were eleven."

Severus lowered his wand.

"Get on with it then."

"It's simple enough. I meant what I said before, Severus the three of us *do* work well together, but world domination of any variety is never going to be as much fun without Hermione's full participation. All I needed was for her to start flinging a few hexes around and slamming doors. She's crossed a line, and I have no need to push her any further she's lost her inhibitions about me, and she can start to feel less like a guest in this house."

Lucius smiled smugly.

"Mission accomplished."

"You might one day come to reconsider the wisdom of letting her get so close," smirked Severus. "She's a dab hand with jinxes and the like."

"Are you sure? That last one I didn't feel any pain at all."

"Oh, you will, my friend you will." Severus sauntered to the door, where he turned and permitted himself a grin. "Catch!" Conjuring a mirror, he tossed it to Lucius.

Hermione was not the only person who slammed doors in Malfoy Manor that night. And while there was a good deal more shouting and name-calling before Severus could restore calm, Lucius was proved to have been prescient concerning the outcome of his strategy. After all, it is a little difficult to retain one's remaining reservations about a man with a full head of candy-pink poodle curls.

*

Spending an inordinate amount of time and money on her appearance for the Yule Ball at the Ministry would seem to have been a worthwhile endeavour, if Severus' reaction was anything to go by. He had never been miserly in his mostly unspoken appreciation of her looks and her body, but she had to admit to herself that it was particularly gratifying to hear his indrawn breath and see his eyes widen when she emerged from her bedroom.

"You are... spectacular tonight, Hermione," he said. "Truly lovely."

She wouldn't have gone that far herself (ah, the benefits of having a man in thrall) but she was pleased with the bronze silk dress, cut high at the front but scooping low behind, which clung and swirled and flattered just as she had hoped it would. She had reluctantly enlisted Lavender's help with her hair and make-up, putting up with being patronised for the sake of results she could never have achieved on her own. Tonight, she was a queen with a crown of shining brown braids, sparkling eyes, and luscious, pouting, kissable lips.

She surveyed her consort.

"You look wonderful yourself, Severus. I'm so pleased to see you in all your buttons again!"

She ran her hands down the chest of his finely-cut frock coat, then up again to sweep his broad shoulders. His hair was severely tied back, emphasising his aquiline features. Not a handsome man, but, oh so very.... She reached up to kiss him.

"Won't I smudge you?" he worried.

She waved her fingers spookily.

"It's maaaaaagic! Lavender promised I could be trampled by a herd of rhinos and still come out looking perfect she was even quite keen that I put it to the test, I think. So it's quite safe to kiss me. In fact, you might find that it's more dangerous not to."

"Wait a minute. I have something for you first."

He reached into his pocket and produced a small box, which he gave to her, an unexpected tremor in his fingers as they brushed hers. She hesitated slightly before opening it to reveal a pair of exquisite peridot earrings which caught the light and sparkled a deep, slightly acidic leaf green.

"Oh, Severus! They're perfect! Just perfect!"

It was the work of moments to step before the mirror and hook them into place. The expression of thanks took rather longer, and was a thorough road-test of the Brown-Weasley beauty charms.

"I'm half-inclined not to go at all, now," teased Hermione, picking up her stole and readying herself for Apparition.

"Just a minute," said Severus. "There's something else. It's from Lucius."

He produced another box. In it lay a delicate bracelet set with peridots to match the earrings. Hermione's mouth made a little 'oh', and she felt herself blush, but she didn't say anything until Severus had clasped the jewels around her wrist.

"Is he coming tonight, do you think?"

"I don't know. He wouldn't say. But he wanted to show you his... regard, I suppose, even if he decides not to face the kind of reaction he's likely to get."

"I wonder how many will respond to Arthur's invitation?"

"We'll see. I'll take you Side-Along, shall I?"

She raised her eyebrows.

"Hackles down, Granger. It's customary at these formal affairs," he growled.

"And of course it gives the 'gentleman' a fine opportunity for a none-too-surreptitious grope. It's a good job I like you, Snape."

*

It was only to be expected that the whispers should run like wildfire when Hermione and Severus were announced together. Hermione just raised her chin a little and cast around in the throng for people she knew well but still wanted to talk to. After Severus had repulsed several unwelcome attempts to cosy up to the Minister's aide, Hermione admitted to him that it was very useful to have a thoroughly disagreeable person around, but since it was actually supposed to be a festive occasion, perhaps he could try acting a little less as though he had been invited to dinner by James Potter.

"Oh, speak of the devil," he muttered. "I'll go and find you a drink."

"Hello, Harry, Ginny," smiled Hermione, more amused than anything else at being abandoned in such a cavalier fashion. A hug, air-kissing, and some inane small-talk were punctuated by the arrival of Ron and Lavender. Ron stared at Hermione with ill-disguised astonishment.

"Blimey, Mione, you look gorgeous!" he said, oblivious to his wife's glare.

"Actually, it's all Lavender's doing, Ron. Thank you so much for finding the time, Lavender. You look fantastic yourself!" And so, in all her blonde glory, she did. "I'm telling everyone about you," Hermione continued. "When's your book coming out?"

"It isn't," Lavender pouted. "Apparently everyone much prefers to stick to the spells and routines their great-great-grandmothers used. We're looking for another publisher, but where Babble Books leads, the rest follow."

"Do you want me to try..."

"No, it's quite all right, Hermione. I'm sure Molly and I will find something."

"Well, let me know," Hermione shrugged. "There's no point having influence if you can't use it to help your friends from time to time."

"You wouldn't have said that before you started seeing Snape," accused Ron.

"No, I don't suppose I would, Ronald. Now, tell me about the children."

Fifteen minutes of duty-boredom later, she slipped away, but not before Harry had caught her by the hand.

"That was nice of you, Hermione. Thanks."

"It's okay. There may be little between us these days, but Ron was my friend for a long time it counts for something." She looked at him doubtfully. "You don't blame me for drifting away, do you?"

"Course not. Times change, you know. And I think you can probably manage your own trolls these days. Come round for a meal some time. Bring Snape if you like. Yes, Ginny, I'm coming!"

Hermione wound her way through the colourfully-dressed witches and wizards, looking for the one dressed all in black. Arthur had done them all proud with this year's celebration. The Yuletide decorations sparkled and glittered like some cross between a Disney fairyland and a dragon's hoard. Music to suit a variety of tastes played in the different ballrooms, where people danced and swayed and laughed. The buffets overflowed with such an abundance of exotic delicacies that she thought even Slughorn might have been impressed. And indeed there was the old fraud, tucking comfits behind his moustache while he smirked to whomever appeared to merit the effort.

She spotted most of her old school friends. There were the Patil twins, with... heavens, Finch-Fletchley and Zabini. Dean and Seamus dancing together to something mushy and romantic, ignoring the disapproving looks they were getting. Cho with a man she didn't recognise. Neville with his wife, Pomona Sprout's daughter, twenty years his senior and clearly besotted with him. Dennis Creevey taking photographs of everyone. Preferring to stay out of the camera's eye, Hermione turned to leave that particular chamber.

"Watch yourself, Granger," came a voice she hadn't heard for a very long time.

"Malfoy," she said neutrally.

"Saw you sloughing off your old acquaintance back there," he jibed.

"Been following me?"

"Now why would I do that?" He suddenly dropped his sarcastic pose and grinned charmingly in a way that reminded her all too strongly of his father. "Actually, I'm looking for Luna. She said she'd seen you, but she's probably got distracted by a Slibbering Whatchamacallit in the curtains or something."

"Luna's here? Oh, that's wonderful! I haven't seen her for so long. Did she come with you? What's she been doing?"

"Blimey, Granger, slow down. Yes, she's here. She's been doing research in the Americas for several years, funded by Harvard. Yes, she's with me. In fact," he said, looking self-conscious, "we got married last week." He pulled at his collar.

"But... but... that's fantastic! I just, um, good grief, Draco, have you told your father?"

"I'm trying to find him as well. Is he here?"

"How should I know?" she responded, blushing a little.

"How should you know? You mean you haven't bloody shagged him yet?" He rolled his eyes.

"*Draco*...! What on earth?" The blush deepened to crimson. "I'm with Severus!"

"Circe's tits, woman how the hell...?" He guffawed. "My poor dad. For weeks I've been getting letters about Miss Granger this, Miss Granger that, then Hermione this and Hermione that. And you say you're unavailable? 'Cause of *Snape*? Priceless, Granger, priceless!" And he walked off, still laughing.

Shortly after that, Severus found her and asked her to dance. In the circle of his arms, her cheek resting against the warm black of his chest and her eyes closed, Hermione sought respite from the light, colour and noise, and from the thoughts that buzzed in her head. He seemed to sense that she didn't want to talk and simply held her, moving with her to the gentle rhythms of the music. Then, still without speaking, he took her by the hand and led her over to where the Ministry elves were serving champagne. They clinked glasses and drank a silent toast.

Something seemed to be happening at the doors. A hush was falling, spreading through the crowd. Hermione, not for the first time, wished she were taller. She couldn't see what the hell was going on.

The bronze-shod foot of the staff of office banged on the floor, echoing oddly in the now-silent room.

"Lucius Malfoy!" announced the voice of the chief usher.

Hermione registered the change in many people's expressions around her, and glanced up at Severus. She began to move.

Fortunately, Arthur was already there. Though Molly was looking sour, he extended a hand to Lucius which he, for once, deigned to shake.

"What a pleasure it is to see you, Mr Malfoy," Arthur was saying, looking round at the audience. "I'm glad you felt able to accept the invitation."

"My pleasure," said Lucius insincerely. "One could hardly refuse to attend such an auspicious occasion, or turn down to opportunity to what was it? 'heal the breaches in our society', now could one? Not and be counted a responsible citizen. Molly, how delightful," he said, bowing slightly to her.

An awkward silence fell.

Hermione had by now pushed her way to the front. She took a deep breath and braced herself.

"Lucius!" she said loudly, giving him a huge smile and walking towards him with her hands extended. He took them in his own and kissed her fingers.

"You look ravishing tonight, my dear."

"You've made quite the effort yourself," she replied, standing on tiptoe to give him a kiss on the cheek. She ignored the mutters this caused. "Arthur, don't get started on all the boring Ministry talk just yet, will you? I'm going to take Mr Malfoy away and make him dance with me. You can have him back when I've worn him out."

"That was bravely done, my dear," Lucius murmured to her as they left in search of something they could both bear to dance to. He patted her hand where it lay in the crook of his arm. "Ah, Severus, your lioness has kidnapped me. I trust you don't mind?"

"Would it make any difference if I did?"

"Well, I might start talking about cave-man sensibilities at inopportune moments," smirked Hermione.

"There you are," sighed Lucius, "my hands are tied. But then, we all have our little kinks.... Ouch! Hermione, I do believe this is my tune."

And, to the strains of "Call Me Irresponsible", he swept her giggling onto the dance floor.

*

Later on, when Severus was helping his friend field the "leeches, bloodsuckers, toadies and other assorted hangers-on" who had swiftly managed to overcome their moral outrage at Lucius' daring to show his face, Hermione went in search of a quiet corner. She had danced with each of them several times, enjoying both Severus' understated competence and Lucius' sometimes outrageous flair, and Harry had claimed her hand for a couple of dances, braving their disdain with a cheeky grin. Now she just wanted to take her heels off for a bit and get some cooler air.

Some clever party-planner had thought to construct a number of bowers and niches for tired or amorous party-goers, and eventually, after a fair few "Ooops, sorry!"s, Hermione found one that seemed unoccupied. She went in and flopped down on the couch, pulling off her elegant sandals and massaging her feet with a groan. Putting her feet up on the arm-rest, she lay back and allowed herself to relax, soothed by the midnight blue and silver décor.

"Hello, Hermione."

She screeched.

"Dear God! Luna! You scared me half to death!"

Luna was sitting on the floor in the darkest corner, dreamily examining a flower that phosphoresced faintly in her cupped hands.

"Pretty, isn't it? I found them in the Amazon basin. They're proving to have various medicinal uses, and curiously enough, Nargles can't abide them. How are you, Hermione? It's good to see you, though you look a little troubled, if you don't mind my saying so."

Hermione's racing heart calmed a little and she smiled. She'd forgotten how gently crackers and eerily perceptive Luna could be.

"It's good to see you, too, Luna and I hear congratulations are in order!"

"Oh, yes, Draco's perfectly lovely, isn't he? He started off funding all my research, you know quite the visionary, though you wouldn't really think it. So what's bothering you, Hermione?"

Bizarrely, although she hadn't seen Luna for about eight years, Hermione felt the urge to confide.

"Don't you want to tell me all about your work?"

"It'll wait. I think you need to talk now."

"I... it's difficult."

"There's always a simple solution, if you know how to look at things the right way."

*

They found her sitting on the hearth rug in the Minister's office, staring contemplatively into the flames. The firelight brought out bright highlights in her hair, and flushed her skin a becoming gold. Her eyes were dark when she looked up.

"We were concerned about you, Hermione," said Severus, crouching next to her. "Has someone upset you?"

"No, it's nothing like that. I just needed to think a bit, that's all. Would you sit down, both of you?"

She stood before them in the firelight as they took their places.

"Severus, Lucius now pay attention."

"Yes, ma'am!" said Lucius, sitting bolt upright.

"Shut up, or I'll dock points," threatened Hermione. "Now I mean to take the bull by the horns here. I can't be doing with subtlety it wastes too much time in important situations..."

"Dear me, Severus," interrupted Lucius. "A *Gryffindor* 'abandoning subtlety'? Shall we need armour, do you think?"

"Padding, at any rate," came the reply.

Hermione stuck out her tongue.

"Now, Severus it is very clear that you... care for... me," she blushed. "Lucius although you have in general behaved with propriety, I don't think I'm being too presumptuous in saying that you, too, have an interest."

He bowed his acknowledgement, while Severus, to Hermione's distress, started to look as though he was about to receive the worst news possible. She hurried on.

"I think the nature of my dilemma here would be most simply explained by showing you something."

She drew her locket from where it was concealed by the high neckline of her dress.

"This is supposed to show the face of my true love, am I right? And indeed here he is." She showed them both Severus' likeness, noting how he relaxed. She smiled at him. "If anything, it's even clearer than before. However..." she opened the locket to display both sides "...here he is as well." Just as clearly engraved was a lightly smirking portrait of Lucius.

There was a brief moment of silence.

"Well, you see my problem, don't you? I don't want to cause any pain, nor do I want to feel any myself, and I definitely don't want to be at the root of any rift in your friendship." She turned to the fire. "None of the conventional responses to this situation is even remotely satisfactory. However " she turned back, to find that they had both stood up. She held a hand out to each of them, pleased to receive an answering grasp from both Severus' broad, strong hand and Lucius' cool, elegant fingers. "However, someone very wise and not at all conventional came up with a simple solution."

"My dear Hermione," began Lucius, running his hand up her bare arm and moving closer.

"*Our* dear Hermione," Severus corrected him, echoing his action and bringing up his other hand to tilt up her chin.

He kissed her deeply, moving closer still until her body was flush with his. She became aware that Lucius was behind her, one hand caressing her waist and hip through the sheer fabric of her dress, the other on her shoulder as his lips moved on the side of her neck.

"I confess, Hermione," Severus admitted after a most satisfactory few minutes, "that we suspected your liking for Lucius went further than you were prepared to acknowledge, and we hoped..."

"You *hoped*." Her eyes narrowed. "You've been discussing this?"

"We hoped that your ties to bourgeois morality were sufficiently weak to allow all three of us to be happy," supplied Lucius. "Had you said nothing, nothing would have changed but I believe none of us would have been truly content."

Hermione stepped away and looked at them both until they began to shuffle like nervous schoolboys.

"Well, I hardly think that Arthur's office is the place to discuss this any further. And such a serious matter requires very thorough investigation, I believe." She licked her lips. "Very thorough."

Matthew Jobberknoll was woken from his slumber by the crack of a triple Side-Along Apparition accompanied by a shriek as someone put his hand somewhere a trifle unexpected.

*

Hermione stretched, careful not to disturb the other occupants of the vast bed. To her left was Severus, his limbs sprawled untidily, to her right, Lucius, managing to look artfully arranged even when tousled and lightly snoring. She seemed to have worn them out. She herself felt perfectly refreshed, even if content to stay where she was, between her two two! lovers. She had never imagined, not even in her wildest dreams.... No, let's be honest, some of her dreams since getting to know the pair of them had actually been pretty wild, and given the circumstances she was rather more ready than usual to admit to them. In fact, given the circumstances, she was pretty sure she would be able to translate some of them into reality.

"What are you smirking about?" mumbled Severus.

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"Maybe not before the first cup of tea. Come here and be hugged, bad wench. And don't wriggle like that. I told you not before the first cup of tea."

"Then for God's sake, let's have some bloody tea!" giggled Hermione.

"I prefer it with milk, to be honest," said Lucius, not bothering to open his eyes. "Merlin's knob, Severus, couldn't you have found us someone a little less frisky? I'm far too old for all this nocturnal activity."

But actions speak louder than words, and it was another hour before tea, together with a substantial breakfast, was summoned.

"Oh, Lucius, did Draco find you last night?" asked Hermione round a sausage.

"Draco was there?"

"Yes and I think he had something rather important to tell you, something he rather wanted to get off his chest."

Pause.

"His chest, gentlemen. Minds on the subject, please."

"Well, he's not here at the Manor, or I'd know. So we must wait for him to contact us, in lieu of an address." Lucius speared a mushroom with some irritation.

"Why don't you just send your Patronus? They can find anyone."

Both men looked uncomfortable.

"What?"

"Nothing it's just..."

"Severus, I can understand your reluctance, but..."

Lucius looked out of the window.

"Oh, *honestly!*"

Hermione sent her otter off in search of Malfoy junior. She noticed Severus' expression.

"What's wrong?"

"It's still an otter." He sounded disappointed. "A Patronus is supposed to change to match the object of one's affections."

"That sounds a little lacking in character," said Hermione. "I bet yours hasn't changed. Cast it go on. No go on. I promise I won't mind if it hasn't changed from, well, you know."

He complied with reluctance, but refused to look at it.

"Um, Severus?" said Hermione carefully. "Could you just take a peek? Is it the same?"

He gave it a nanosecond's attention.

"It is. Bugger."

"Lucius, do you know any really good resurrection spells? Because right now I'd like to bring back Dumbledore so I can invent a few new ways of killing him. Ahem. That creature's in your memory as a doe, isn't it, Severus?" she asked gently.

He nodded.

"Did you ever really look at it full on?"

Shrug.

"I think perhaps you should do so now, you know."

She wrapped her arms round him. Her voice shook as she said, "Be brave, Severus."

"It's... It's... You know, Hermione," he said conversationally, "I think I'd like to murder the old bastard a few more times myself."

Lucius, his shoulders already heaving with mirth, let rip a guffaw.

"A *llama*?! You mistook a *llama* for a *doe*?"

"Shut up, clever-clogs. Hermione, stop giggling. All right, then, Lucius, I've shown you mine, now you get to show me yours."

"The casting of a Patronus Charm was considered to be in rather poor taste in the Dark Lord's inner circle," said Lucius in lofty tones.

"Afraid, Lucius?"

"Not at all."

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

"You know you can trust us," said Hermione with a straight face.

"I think some things are best left a mystery, don't you?"

"Can't abide mysteries. Can you, Severus?"

"You might as well do it, Lucius You've seen what she's like when she wants to know something. And don't flounce. You're naked and in a rumpled bed flouncing doesn't work."

"Very well though I may have to murder you afterwards. *Expecto Patronum!*"

Pause.

Muffled giggling.

"Um, Lucius was it by any chance at your suggestion that none of us was to use the Patronus charm?"

"Maybe."

Less muffled giggling.

"Shut up, Hermione."

*

Author Note:

A "Thelwell pony" is generally small, round, grumpy, and very hairy. For those unfortunate enough to have grown up *not* knowing the genius of Norman Thelwell, I direct you to the following web site: <http://www.thelwell.org.uk/index.html>

And particularly to the following cartoon: <http://www.thelwell.org.uk/images/ponies/pages/Ponies8.htm> the pony here, named Kipper, is clearly a Slytherin.

Epilogue

Chapter 12 of 12

The Prime Minister needs money. It strikes him that he knows where there may be some to be found. Severus and Hermione join forces to thwart him and to protect Lucius Malfoy, who has the most to lose.

Epilogue: or, the tying up of loose ends because Severus insisted, and what Severus wants, Severus generally gets. (He's not quite as bad as Lucius, but Lucius couldn't give a fig about such trivialities, so if we were relying on him, we really wouldn't find out all those little things that keep niggling at us, would we?)

Lucius came to enjoy breakfast-time very much indeed, even once the three of them had managed to get past the 'staying in bed until noon, returning for an afternoon "nap", ahem, and spending a very brief part of the evening up and dressed' stage. No more cup-throwing for him. Or at least, not very often. Gone were the days of wishing for perfectly turned-out icy blondes, willowy redheads, and lush raven-haired beauties. In their place was one very attractive young woman who disclaimed all responsibility for anything her hair might do, and frequently came to the table wearing whichever dressing-gown came to hand first, and a lamentable pair of fluffy bunny slippers. She also insisted on drinking coffee in the mornings, and took out a subscription to *The Guardian*. Severus frequently squabbled with her about who got to do the Sudoku puzzles. He was also, after the judicious application of blackmail, induced to let Lucius in on the secret of the biro, so that Lucius no longer had to do the *Times* crossword in his head.

*

Hermione spent the three months following Christmas searching for a new job. It wasn't easy: she was over-qualified; she didn't have enough experience in the field; she'd pissed off her prospective boss in her role as aide to the Minister; the job turned out to be utterly tedious.... And so on. Until the morning she threw down yet another rejection letter and expressed the opinion that it was hopeless and she would be Arthur's flunky until the day she died.

"There's no need for you to look for a new position at all, Hermione," said Lucius, barely raising his eyes from his paper.

"It's kind of you, Lucius, but I'm not going to be a kept woman," she said firmly. "I need to have my own role in life."

"Didn't I tell you? Either of you? Severus, stop giving her that approving smile – it makes you look half-witted."

"Tell us what?" they said.

"You're both partners in Malfoy Enterprises, with special responsibility for blue-skies research."

"And when did this happen?" asked Severus.

"About two months ago."

"Hermione, do you want to hex him or shall I?"

Lucius' hands went protectively to his hair.

Hermione handed in her notice about half an hour later. Severus, ever one to finish a job properly, stayed at his self-imposed task at Number Ten for another three years, until even he was convinced that the last traces of Voldemort's schemes had been removed from public life.

*

Hermione's first piece of research involved the neutralisation of Narcissa's shoe charm. Having sat on one too many cunningly placed stiletto heels, she set to work tracing the character and anchor-totem of the spell, which she then annotated, neutralised, and patented. Well – Narcissa wasn't about to do so, and it might come in useful for something, some day.

Her own shoe habits remained frugal. When she fell in love with a pair, she wore them until they fell apart. It was a sad day when the boots Severus had given her disintegrated, but a good one, too, as he was prepared for the event with their replacements ready and waiting. She allowed Lucius to keep her in good riding boots. Neither of them could persuade her to abandon the horrible slippers.

*

Lavender and Molly's book was eventually published as the flagship oeuvre of *The New Domestic Magic-User* series, part of the Library of Mock, Snipe and Grumble, a lesser-known subsidiary of Malfoy Enterprises. It was a runaway success.

*

The Duchess was 'retrieved' without mishap. She and Sir Guy de Malfoi managed to scandalise the other portraits to such an extent that they were eventually moved to a room of their own and only allowed out on special occasions.

*

The Prime Minister did indeed leave his job in a cloud of glory, and with an approval rating such as had never been seen before. He quit politics entirely and took a position as consultant to Malfoy Enterprises.

*

Hermione eventually gave in to the cajolement of her husbands and had children, whom she adored but resolutely refused to bore on about unless specifically asked to do so. By the time she decided that her family was big enough, there were two Granger-Snapes, two Granger-Malfoys and one (both St Mungo's and the Dept. of Mysteries were eager to know how she had achieved this) Granger-Snape-Malfoy.

This child had a mass of curly, white-blond hair, snapping black eyes, a beaky nose, and a fierce intelligence. She was sorted into Hufflepuff.

*

Lucius' Patronus is a rockhopper penguin: small, cantankerous, and sporting a wild hairdo.

http://www.sxc.hu/pic/m/f/fl/florian-e/759479_rockhopper_penguin.jpg

*

The End