

A Very Good Partner

by pokeystar

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Chapter 1 of 1

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She had a headache of monumental proportions and its name was Ronald Bilius Weasley. He wasn't her problem anymore, precisely. He hadn't been for eight years now. And yet somehow that didn't stop her from cringing every time he chewed with his mouth open or used the shrimp fork to eat his salad. He was drinking far too much, too...clearly failing to notice that the exquisite crystal goblets magically refilled whenever one set them down.

She supposed she should be grateful that the more sozzled Ron got, the more his arms waved around, holding the goblet high above the table's surface. But really, by that time it was far too late. Because a drunk Ron was a chatty Ron. A tactlessly chatty Ron...since tact was always the first thing to go, with him; if he'd ever had it in the first place. Unfortunately, she couldn't say the same for his enunciation and projection skills.

"I need a house-elf," Ron announced. "Got the tosh for one now. Tired of washing my pants and cooking every night."

He waved his wine glass at Zabini, who was seated across from him, directly to her left. A little of the dark red liquid sloshed over the rim, but evaporated mid-air, before it could blemish the antique linen tablecloth.

"Did you know she made me take out the trash?" He burped loudly, then blinked blearily a few seconds to regain his train of thought. "The Muggle way. Every week."

Zabini looked faintly horrified, but it was impossible to tell if he was shocked at Ron's lack of decorum or by what he'd revealed. Then again, it could be combination of both.

"Bought her all sorts of things she never wore. Even though I always took the trash out." He paused to drink more wine and she prayed to Nimue he would forget what he was saying. No such luck.

"Nighties and camisoles and stockings. Peig...peign...nighties." She was very glad Rose was seated at the other end of the monolithic table, near Astoria; hopefully, her night would not be ruined.

"Corsets and frilly knickers...she wouldn't wear any of it. Claimed it was itchy." Of course, that meant Draco Malfoy was privy to her preferences in undergarments. And there were four more courses to be served. The vice squeezing at her temples drew tighter.

"So I bought crotch less ones. You'd think I asked her to make a Hor..." Her hastily cast Stinging Hex found its target. "OW! What'd you do THAT for, Hermione?"

Malfoy looked vaguely repelled yet amused by the scene unfolding in front of him; Hermione couldn't detect any deeper interest in what Ron had been about to say. The glare she'd perfected at Hogwarts had very little effect on her former husband, however. His eyes narrowed in response and she braced herself for more humiliation. She knew that look well.

"Barely let me kiss her in public. We were married; we had two kids, for Merlin's sake. Didn't find 'em in the cabbage patch, you know." He tilted his head to the left, looking

at his forgotten dinner date, who had been watching Hermione with unconcealed avid delight. "But you never had a problem with that, Baby, did you?"

That, Hermione thought, *is the understatement of a century*. Lavender Brown was the textbook definition of an exhibitionist. And luckily for her audience, it seemed the ex-Mrs. Flint Pucey McMillan was in the mood for a demonstration. She shoved her tongue down Ronald's throat.

Well, at least it shut him up.

The plates were cleared and the sixth course, a scrumptious looking Beef Wellington arrived, but Hermione had trouble enjoying it while the couple seated across from her played tonsil Quidditch. She tried making conversation with Blaise, which was difficult because they had little in common, and Malfoy kept interjecting pointed comments designed to draw her attention to the snogging duo opposite her.

She decided she'd had enough when she noticed Ron's hand creeping toward Lavender's artificially augmented bosom. Rose's happiness would survive the knowledge that her Father was a complete pillock, whether Hermione was there or not. He might even compose himself a little without her presence aggravating his ridiculously over-inflated resentment complex.

She turned her back to Malfoy and asked Blaise for directions to the loo. Draco had been provided enough amusement at her expense; she refused to give him more. Zabini, a frequent guest at the Manor, gave her simple instructions and a sympathetic glance, which prompted her immediate, surreptitious departure from the table. Malfoy's gleeful chuckle followed her out the door. She hoped the house-elves spiked his shampoo with Astoria's depilatory serum. Perhaps they did already. It would explain the persistent receding hairline, despite the availability of effective hair-restoring potions.

That thought cheered her immensely, as did the all-too-brief respite in one of the Manor's luxurious guest bathrooms...filled to the eyeteeth with Carrara marble and gilt-leafed fixtures...she was mildly surprised that the bidet wasn't solid gold. Still, even though she had no desire to inadvertently visit rooms she'd only seen in her worst nightmares since the Second War, she was extremely reluctant to return to the dining room. For all she knew, the guests were politely ignoring Ron as he screwed Lavender into the heirloom Aubusson rug. Not that Malfoy would allow it. He'd only let things go on as long as they had because of her. Sadistic git.

She finished drying her hands and left the loo, idly wandering the long hallway away from the dining room. Merlin willing, she'd find a library or a small study to hide in. She could always claim she'd gotten lost trying to return. They would all know she was lying, of course, but at this point she couldn't give an Animagus rat's arse if they did.

And then she heard it.

da dum ... da dum

da it da it da ... da it da it da

do do do do do do do do do do do do do

da dum ... da dum

da it da it da ... da it da it da

do doo ... do doo ... do do do do do do do do do

Someone was playing the piano in a nearby room. Quite beautifully, too. The tune was a complex, slightly mournful waltz that sounded ... syncopated. Hermione frowned a little. Waltzes were not syncopated in her, admittedly limited, experience. She nudged the door open as quietly as possible and peeked inside. A tall, elegant figure dressed in formal black robes, his long silky blond hair captured neatly in a queue that bisected his broad back, was seated at the gleaming grand piano situated in the centre of the room. His hands flew gracefully across the ivory keys, the emerald signet ring on his left middle finger flashing in the candlelight.

"Please come in, Madame, and shut the door behind you, before that termagant I must call daughter-in-law hears the music. If she realizes I escaped, she will hunt me down, and then we will both have to return to that horror show."

She stepped inside and closed the door gently behind her. "I could leave the door open and find another room."

"If you must," he replied, unperturbed. "I can only hope that certain sayings contain a grain of truth." He added an extra arpeggio for emphasis.

"What ever are you talking..." Hermione gasped. "You are really awful. I'm sure Astoria is not a savage beast."

"I was referring to you, my dear Madame Weasley. If bloodlust concerning boorish husbands, and therefore, men in general, qualifies."

"Based on personal experience, I assume? No wonder that you play so beautifully. You must have practiced for hours every day."

His hands paused briefly on the keyboard. "Music was a comfort to my wife in those final months, certainly, but I atoned for my boorish behavior in other ways, long ago." Lucius started playing again, picking up the tune where he had left off.

Hermione leaned back against the door. She was at a loss for a response to that.

"If you are staying, Madame Weasley, I would prefer you seated near me, here. It is very rude of me to have my back turned to a guest. If Astoria discovered us, I would never hear the end of it." He topped off a glissando with a flourish of his hand that gestured to an upholstered chair facing the piano.

I'm a bit mad to stay, she thought, *but his company is infinitely preferable to returning to the dining room* Or accidentally finding herself in the dreaded drawing room, if she attempted to find another refuge. She wondered if this made Lucius the devil or the deep blue sea. She walked over to the piano, but chose to stand next to it, facing him as he played.

He acknowledged her partial compliance with a slight curl of his lip, but made no other comment and continued playing.

"This piece is gorgeous," Hermione commented after a few moments. "It's so sad and yet, hopeful at the same time."

"It was one of Narcissa's favourites," Lucius replied, looking up at her, his eyes contemplative. "I always thought it odd that she loved such a mournful song." He paused, listening intently as he played. "You're right. There is a thread of hope running through it. I wonder why I never heard it before."

"What is it called?" she asked, swaying a little as she was caught up in the melody.

"Bink's Waltz. Scott Joplin supposedly wrote it for his only child, a daughter who died only a few months after being born. We tried for years to have a child before Draco. I believe Cissy felt a deep affinity for Joplin's loss."

"Do you miss her?" She rested her hands on the glossy black wood. It thrummed under her fingertips.

"I must admit, Madame Weasley, to missing the idea of her more than her actual self." He smiled wryly. "She was a simple creature. The only being she loved deeply, other than herself, was her son. And him, she spoiled shamelessly."

Hermione stopped swaying and fixed Lucius with a gimlet stare. "Yes, Draco was a horrible child because his mother sent him candy every Sunday."

"Guilty as charged, Madame Weasley." He returned her stare evenly, wholly unapologetic. "What sentence do you pronounce for deficient fatherhood?"

"I shall have to deliberate on that. It is a very complex issue." She removed her tingling fingers from the baby grand and retreated slightly to sit in the upholstered chair.

"You did a wonderful job with Rose and Hugo, from what I can tell," Lucius commented. "Their manners are impeccable; they are intelligent and genial..."

"Unlike my *former* husband?" She pursed her lips at the crook in his eyebrow. "Ron is intelligent, and normally genial. Tomorrow he will be very apologetic."

"If he remembers this evening," he replied.

"In anger, in wine, and in a child, there is truth," she murmured.

"Itchy knickers are an indication of poor taste, not a dispassionate woman." His eyebrow quirked further in challenge.

"Ah. But, sir, I am as sober as a judge," she demurred.

Was he flirting with her? This night could not get any stranger.

"If only the rest of the Wizengamot were as beautiful..."

He was and it just did.

"May I remind you, Sir, that your grandson is marrying my daughter two days from now?" she inquired, fussing a bit with her gown.

The music stopped for a few moments, and then began again. It was a different tune this time. Chopin. He was suddenly in front of her, and she looked up, confused. He was tucking his wand into an inner pocket on his robe.

"You may, not that I need a reminder. In fact, I was just about to ask you to save a dance for me." He clasped his hands behind his back, at ease.

"I don't dance. Or rather, I haven't, in many years." She smiled apologetically. "Ron loathed dancing, and I was always too busy networking at the Ministry's formal functions."

"That is a shame, Madame. If you had danced more, you would probably be Chief Warlock by now." He offered her a hand. "No excuses. I'll help you relearn the steps for a waltz."

She put her hand in his, bemused. It still felt tingly from resting on the lid. He gently pulled her to her feet, her left hand still captured in his right, his left arm cradling her torso as his hand splayed across her back. He waited patiently until she placed her right hand lightly at his shoulder; then he guided her through the simpler steps.

"Why do you think I would be Chief Warlock by now if I had danced more at Ministry functions?" she asked when she felt she had the steps down.

"The wizarding world, as you know, is very old-fashioned and resistant to change. A great deal of emphasis is placed on the social niceties. By dancing, you would have demonstrated an understanding of our culture, and respect for it." He twirled her into a graceful reverse. "Plus, there are few wizards who can resist the charms of an alluring witch in their arms. Many influential wizards, myself included, have used that fact to their advantage."

"I always thought you bribed or bullied the opposition," she remarked mildly as he spun her around again.

"Silly wench. The Malfoy fortune is prodigious, but not that extensive. As for bullying, it has its place, but becomes less effective if used overmuch. The Dark Lord never understood that." He caught her about the waist and lifted her up for three beats, her hands naturally falling to his shoulders.

"You can catch more flies with honey than vinegar," she muttered breathlessly.

"Indeed." He set her back down and resumed the tri-step tempo. "Music hath charms to soothe a savage breast, to soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak."

She tried to halt, but he deftly swept her into a dizzying reverse. "I beg your pardon?" she inquired pertly when her head cleared.

"Congreve is often misquoted. To soothe outraged Puritan sensibilities, I'm sure." His eyes sparkled with mischievous intent. "The correct term is savage breast. And yours is most becoming."

"Why do I feel like a sticky fly, all of the sudden?" Her narrowed eyes met his. The glint in them had developed a hint of lasciviousness. Her cheeks reddened in response.

"Ah, my sweet. That is the pertinent question." He leaned down, and spoke directly in her ear, his warm breath causing shivers to run up her spine. "I have been following your career for quite some time. You possess an intelligence and keen sense of judgment that will propel you to the head of the Ministry, given the opportunity. Change will come, has come to our world; it is just a matter of degree, now." His hands glided the length of her back. "In following you, in getting to know Rose and Hugo through Scorpius, I have found a number of my beliefs to be misguided, at best."

She snorted. "At best."

"And in the process, I became fascinated by you." He stood straight again and lifted her up, holding her above him easily. "I will woo you, Hermione, because you are a witch worth having. I want to be happy for once, and I think that we will deal well together."

She eyed him askance as he guided her feet to the floor. "Of course, my political future..."

"Will assure the continuing prominence of my family name, yes. Icing on the cake, as it were." He shrugged dismissively as he spun her in a new direction.

"Not the whole cake, then?" she inquired, her eyes on his shoulders.

He nudged her chin upwards. "One of the base ingredients, perhaps, but certainly not the only one." His lips brushed hers, the gentle pressure as light as a butterfly wing, withdrawing just as they elicited a response.

A gentle cough from the doorway drew their attention, and Hermione's arms fell away from his shoulders as they turned to look at the polite interloper.

It was Astoria Malfoy, a knowing look on her face. "You missed dessert, Father, Hermione. Everyone's left but Rose and Scorpius. They wanted to say goodnight to you both."

"Was Ron much of a problem?" Hermione asked, feeling a bit guilty at leaving her hostess in the lurch.

"He passed out shortly after you went out. Draco administered a Sobering Charm and had Netty help Lavender Floo him home." She smiled apologetically. "I tried to tell Draco those goblets were not a good idea."

"Ron should have paid more attention," she replied.

"Hopefully, the headache he'll wake up with tomorrow will deter him in the future," Lucius inserted smoothly. "We will be right behind you, Astoria."

She nodded, and went into the hallway, leaving the door open after her.

"Will you?" he inquired, taking out his wand to stop the music.

"Will I?" Hermione parroted confusedly.

"Save a dance for me at the wedding?" he clarified, slipping the wand back into his pocket.

She studied him for several long moments. "I believe I will. You are a very good partner."

He offered her his arm to escort her back to the others. "Thank you, my dear. I intend to be, for a long time."

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Bink's Waltz (1905) was thought to be either a commission written for a local businessman in honour of his son, or written in memory of Joplin's infant daughter.

Link to Waltz, played by Phillip Dyson: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25XSovLMONQ>

Music hath charms to soothe a savage breast, to soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak William Congreve

In anger, in wine, and in a child, there is truth Pliny

Many thanks to a wonderful beta, Kazfeist... you're the best.

Originally written for Lady Karelia as part of the Im/hg fic exchange.

Original Prompt: 1. Lucius has a secret passion: he plays the piano. Hermione discovers it. 2. The demise of the Dark Lord and events during the battle caused Lucius to acquire a conscience. He seeks redemption and approaches the one person he thinks can help him to become a decent person: Hermione Granger 3. Hermione decides to learn ballroom dancing the wizarding way. The teacher is none other than Lucius Malfoy. ~ Not redemptive, precisely, but a somewhat changed man, at least.