

# The White Peacock

*by Bambu*

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## Chapter One

*Chapter 1 of 3*

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**Title: The White Peacock**

**Author: Bambu**

A/N: This story was written for Live Journal's 2010 Lucius Big Bang festival.

Only the order of the words and a handful of original characters dotting the landscape are mine; otherwise, this universe belongs to JKR and her assignees. My ever-patient beta-team, TalesofSnape, Bambumom, and Mundungus42, has my everlasting gratitude. I've dumped odd bits and pieces in their laps, and then, finally, the whole thing in a rush. Thank you, ladies, as always.

Please be advised this story is epilogue compliant, and in one scene I have quoted dialogue directly from *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Those quotes will be found in boldface.

~o0o~

The first time he saw her after the war, she was in the witness chair. His was among the last of the Post-Voldemort Death Eater trials, and a parade of witnesses had already taken the stand. By that point in the proceedings, Lucius had donned the mask of polite disinterest he'd perfected over the years, but his ears heard each word of damning testimony. It littered his mental landscape like the incendiary hexes hurling past him at Hogwarts that last day.

His already perfect posture stiffened when he heard the bailiff announce her name. The rolling wave of accolades which preceded her entrance into courtroom ten crashed against the storm-tossed shore of his defenses, and he refused to look at her.

A young page with carefully combed hair and starched formal robes scurried down the aisle to hand Lucius' barrister, Henry Cromwell, a scroll of parchment. Cromwell, youngest partner in Carstairs, Avery & Lovegood, the Malfoy family representatives for seven generations, dismissed the lad with a quiet word of praise. Cromwell, the first half-blood in the firm's history and its rising star, unrolled the note, scanned its contents swiftly, and only his table-mate heard him grunt. Satisfaction or dismay, Lucius wondered.

As if it mattered.

While the questioning of the witness commenced, Lucius stared across the room, at the ancient timbers lining its walls, and let his brain idle. Added to the weight of previous testimony, her condemnation could only end in one result: he would lose. Fighting the urge to shrug his shoulders, Lucius thought, *what more can be taken from*

*me?* He had already lost the goodwill of his wife and the respect of his son. He had backed the wrong political party and Voldemort had been irrevocably defeated. Despite his own youthful fantasies of power and prestige, Lucius' life had not been better with the Death Eaters in control.

The sound of the special prosecutor's questions and the witness' answers droned on.

"Are you saying the defendant wasn't under the effects of the Imperius curse?"

"No, sir. I'm saying I don't know the defendant well enough to tell. I've met Mr. Malfoy a handful of times. I met Mr. Crouch an equal number of times during the Triwizard Tournament, and I never knew *he* was Imperiused at the time."

It was entirely likely the Malfoy family fortune and estates would devolve to some third cousin twice removed, and Lucius gritted his teeth at the thought. Before his imagination conjured an image of Arthur Weasley drinking cognac in the manor's library, Lucius' attention was arrested by the prosecutor's next question.

"Is it true you testified on Draco Malfoy's behalf?"

Momentarily his façade shattered, and Lucius snapped his head in the witness' direction. He stared at the young woman incredulously. His first, irrelevant thought was that she was so young. His second was that she cleaned up quite nicely, despite the depredations of the past year. She was too thin, her small but regular features standing out in her pale face, and her wild hair was neatly confined in an elegant twist at the back of her head.

"If by telling the truth," Hermione Granger replied, "you consider it testifying on his behalf, then the answer is yes."

"And what was the nature of your relationship with the Malfoy heir, Miss Granger?"

The underlying insinuation wasn't lost on anyone in the vast courtroom, and at Lucius' side Cromwell ceased writing, his quill poised mid-word, but the witness seemed unfazed. Hermione angled her head as if to toss a mane of unruly hair out of her face and tilted her chin. Lucius almost admired her spunk.

"Adversarial," she said.

"I beg your pardon?" asked the special prosecutor. Harold Butcher had waited years for his opportunity to shine before the Wizengamot. His robes were new bought before his first, successful Death Eater trial and he adjusted his crimson and gold striped tie. He never said he'd been a Gryffindor, but he never corrected others' assumptions either. During Voldemort's short-lived control of the wizarding government, Butcher had worn green and silver ties, kept his head down, his mouth shut, and had survived the post-war purge.

In the witness chair, Hermione demurely crossed her legs at the ankle, exactly like a pureblood witch, and answered readily enough. "We weren't friends."

"Weren't? And are you friends with him now?"

She sniffed in disdain. "Mr. Butcher, I can assure you that at no point since our acquaintance began have Draco Malfoy and I been friends. At best, we were academic rivals, at worst, he was " she faltered for the first time.

Flashes of memory exploded behind Lucius' eyelids: her writhing in agony on the carpet of his drawing room, screaming; a thin red scar bisecting her chest; horror etched upon her face as Greyback licked her skin; that same expression mirrored on Draco's face as he watched.

Lucius gripped the wooden arm of his chair, the courtroom was silent, and there was triumph in Butcher's voice as he prompted the witness. "Yes?"

Hermione swallowed hard before answering. "At worst, Draco Malfoy was a terrified young man operating under coercion no adult could withstand. He might have used insults he learnt as a child..." serious brown eyes swept the serried rows of the wizarding world's judiciary, resting at last on the immaculately groomed figure of Narcissa Malfoy seated two rows behind her husband, "...and he might bear the Dark Mark on his arm, but when given the opportunity, he did not betray Harry or Ron or me to our captors or Bellatrix Lestrange."

Butcher frowned, but rallied. "And yet, according to Mr. Potter, Draco Malfoy was involved in the Fiendfyre episode where he attempted to kill you during the Battle for Hogwarts."

"I think you're misstating what Harry said." The prosecutor's lips thinned in displeasure, and Hermione continued, undaunted. "Greg Goyle and Vince Crabbe were trying to kill Harry; Malfoy attempted to keep them from doing so."

"I find that hard to believe."

Cromwell rose from his seat, dark eyes flashing. "Your Honor," he addressed the head mugwump, one hand turned elegantly toward the prosecutor, "my esteemed colleague, Mr. Butcher, is harassing his own witness."

"I concur, Mr. Cromwell." The head mugwump looked down his slender nose and nodded. "Mr. Butcher, stop badgering the witness. Miss Granger is not on trial."

"Yes, sir." Butcher swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing in his scrawny throat, and he shuffled the parchment on the barrister's table while visibly reining in his irritation. "My apologies, Miss Granger. Allow me to restate. I understand you were present when Harry Potter saved Draco Malfoy's life from Fiendfyre conjured by the late Vincent Crabbe."

Hermione's lips twisted in an odd smile. "Yes. If Malfoy owes anyone a life debt, it's Harry. I think Malfoy was just trying to stay alive. In fact, I think he's very much like his father."

Flurries of whispered comments broke out in the courtroom, Cromwell underlined a note on his parchment, and Lucius considered the truth of Hermione's statement. Then, regaining his attention, she said with clipped deliberation, "Let me say this more plainly, Mr. Butcher. Regardless of his politics or out-dated bigotry, Lucius Malfoy did NOT curse, hex, or otherwise attack me whilst I was a prisoner in his home. The late and unlamented Bellatrix Lestrange and Fenrir Greyback were responsible. Mr. Malfoy was only a witness to my treatment at their hands."

When she left the room, Lucius noted the way her tasteful robes swirled about her neatly shod feet, and he realized the color of the fabric matched the crimson of her blood; the blood he had last seen marring the alabaster perfection of her throat.

It was the same color as his.

~oOo~

*Excerpts from a letter written to Bertram Avery, senior partner in Carstairs, Avery & Lovegood, no. 12 Upper Diagon Alley, London, England by Henry Cromwell, partner in Carstairs, Avery & Lovegood, Ministry Archives, Ministry of Magic, London, England*

*Dear Bert,*

*The Granger girl was perfect; honorable, self-sacrificing, and as intelligent as we were led to believe. The next time Minerva waxes poetic about one of her protégés, I trust you'll listen with equally sharp attention.*

I'm quite thankful for the Malfoy hauteur, otherwise, his fatalism could be fatal (if you'll excuse the pun) for our case. Indeed, Lucius is quite certain the verdict will be equivalent to a dementor's kiss despite any argument I might put forth. And yet, after Potter took the stand, and now with Granger's testimony, I believe the outcome we desire is within our reach.

Shacklebolt also took the stand today. His testimony ....

If Minerva is as perceptive about all her cubs as she has been about Potter and Granger, I have my work cut out for me with young Weasley tomorrow. If he is as susceptible to flattery as we suspect, I will do my utmost to truncate Weasley's time on the stand. For all his faults, Butcher can be as focused as a merman hunting grindylows, and...

Until we next meet, I trust my owl finds you in good health. If you continue to court the esteemed Madam McGonagall, I shall be the first to offer you joy.

Yrs, etc. etc.

Hal

~o0o~

The next time he saw her, Lucius was languishing in Azkaban prison. He had served five of his ten years, and Cromwell had assured Lucius he would be released before he served a sixth. Good behavior, it seemed, had its own rewards.

While he could attest to the differences between Azkaban then and Azkaban now -- lack of dementors being the most notable -- a proper cup of tea seemed beyond the abilities of the prison-elves. Lucius drank the weak, lukewarm beverage on his breakfast tray whilst reading Draco's latest letter. Mail was only one advantage to the reformed prison system, and Lucius had taken full advantage of it to manage what was left of his fortune and estate, and to keep abreast of wizarding current events.

Over the years, attrition had narrowed Lucius' approved list of correspondents from five to three. The first name excised from the list occurred before he'd stepped into the closet-sized cell that was to be his domicile for a decade.

For a moment, Draco's neatly scripted words blurred as painful memory blossomed in Lucius' mind.

He had been lucky at his trial. Cromwell had argued and won his case. As Lucius hadn't committed a single crime during his year of emasculated house arrest, he was simply returned to Azkaban to serve the remainder of his original sentence for the disastrous break-in at the Hall of Prophecy. He had retained his life and most of his fortune -- that which Voldemort had not spent, or the steep legal fees required for three separate Malfoy family trials.

While awaiting conveyance from the Ministry of Magic, Lucius had an unexpected visitor.

"You can't correspond with Severus Snape," the Minister pro tem said, his voice oddly strangled, a crumpled piece of parchment gripped in his hand.

"I see." Out of long-standing habit, Lucius threaded a thick strand of his pearl-white hair through his fingers. "Perhaps his and my library hours will coincide at Azkaban."

Shacklebolt goggled at Lucius, crossed the scuffed floor of the Magical Law Enforcement holding cell and sat in the rickety wooden chair facing the prisoner. "Did no one tell you?"

"Given your dismay, the answer is obvious. No. I haven't been told." When Shacklebolt shifted uncomfortably, Lucius' patience snapped. "*What haven't I been told?*"

"Snape's dead."

It took several seconds before Lucius could speak. "Severus is dead?"

A grimace of utter revulsion crossed Shacklebolt's handsome face. "Voldemort loosed his snake on him."

Lucius blinked. "His perfidy was uncovered?"

"Perfidy?"

"Don't pretend to misunderstand me, Shacklebolt."

The minister smiled fleetingly, white teeth a startling contrast to his complexion. "I sometimes forget we were at school together."

"Indeed, you were adequate competition."

For a brief moment, they could have been seventeen again and vying for Aurora Sinistra's attention in Advanced Arithmancy, yet the gravitas of thirty years quickly settled upon their shoulders.

"No," Shacklebolt said, "Voldemort never discovered Snape's true motivations. He kept things close to the vest, that one. I doubt anyone knew before Harry declared Snape's devotion to " Lucius snorted derisively. "You knew?" Shacklebolt asked.

"Severus was my friend."

"Merlin's short and curlyes, Lucius! How could you continue -- Why did you never " Shacklebolt shook his head. "It doesn't matter any longer. The point is Voldemort never knew. He killed Snape to acquire his wand."

"His wand? Why would the Dark *Voldemort* want Severus' wand? He had already taken mine." Bitter resentment colored Lucius' words.

"The great irony is it didn't work for Voldemort at all; the wand's allegiance had already been won by Draco."

Lucius jerked as if he'd been hit with a Stinging Hex. "Draco?"

A small chime rang and Shackbolt pulled an ornate timepiece from a pocket of his robes. He glanced at it, grimaced, and shook his head. "I must go."

"What about Draco?"

Shackbolt deliberately side-stepped the real question. "I've already taken steps to see he has gainful employment during the term of his probation." He pocketed the timepiece. "We won't be meeting again, Lucius at least not in the immediately foreseeable future. The climate is too unsettled, and there are other considerations to take into account."

Before Lucius could give voice to any of his dozen questions, Shackbolt had left the room. It was only later Lucius discovered the minister had made a place for Draco within his own staff.

In the course of the following five years, Draco faithfully corresponded with his father, and while their first few missives had been stilted and filled with unwritten recriminations, Lucius was nevertheless thankful he and his son had managed the difficult bits.

He blinked, recalling himself to his location, and re-read the last paragraph of Draco's letter.

*Cromwell's partner assures me you'll be home for the holidays. I won't choose the Yule tree until you're here and we can do it together. Remember how much fun it used to be?"*

Lucius did remember. It had been an annual father-son tradition. Depending on Draco's age and the protective charms on his broom, father and son would race their broomsticks through the New Forest adjoining Malfoy land, eat the picnic packed by the house-elves, and finally, as the sun began its descent, they would choose the perfect tree. When they returned to the manor, Narcissa would be waiting with refreshments: fresh cocoa for Draco, Calvados for Lucius, and warm gingerbread for the family.

Of course, this year, Narcissa wouldn't be part of that tradition. She was the other correspondent who had been dropped from Lucius' list. This year, as for the past four, she would be enjoying her new life in Monaco's wizarding enclave. Narcissa had stood by Lucius until his sentence was read, and then had used her first, and only, conjugal visit to serve him with divorce papers.

At the time, it had been a brutal repudiation, but five years of semi-isolation had granted Lucius new perspective on a number of things, including his marriage.

Lost in the past, he didn't hear his cell door open.

"You have a visitor, Malfoy. Get up and come with me."

"Good morning to you, Mr. Folsom," Lucius replied, folding his letter and slipping it under the scratchy wool blanket he used as a pillow. "I trust Mrs. Folsom is well and all the little Folsoms are healthy."

Folsom nodded, but didn't comment. Reconstructionist guards at Azkaban weren't allowed to harm the prisoners unless given a reason; Lucius never gave them a reason.

He followed his guard along draughty corridors, refusing to hurry or hunch his shoulders against the biting cold of the incessant North Wind buffeting Azkaban. They descended into the depths of the rocky island, and toward the prison's warmest rooms: the library and visiting room, where fires burned day and night warding off the predations of sea salt.

Lucius halted abruptly in the visiting room's doorway. "I suspect there's been a mistake," he said.

Hermione Granger turned from staring at the fire, her eyes widening when she caught sight of Lucius, but her composure didn't otherwise falter. The differences in her might be as notable as the changes in him. Lucius barely registered her clothing beyond the fact her unremarkable robes were of excellent quality and the color suited her; he was too busy staring at her wealth of hair. Whereas his had been shorn before he'd reached his cell, and kept short subsequently, Hermione's hair had been allowed to grow until it reached the small of her back, its weight pulling some of the rampant bushiness from its mass. It shone in the firelight, and if one were to take the time to look, myriad hues from golden brown to chestnut could be seen amongst the curls.

"There's been no mistake, Mr. Malfoy," she said quietly, her formerly girlish tone modulated by maturity. "You're under no obligation to agree, but I would like to speak with you."

Lucius' curiosity overrode any disinclination he might have had, and he bowed his head in acquiescence. Hermione started forward, but checked her movement when Folsom waved his wand. A magical halo shimmered into existence a handspan above Lucius, and then it dropped like a net to engulf its recipient.

"I'm sure that isn't necessary," she said. "I have my wand."

"Azkaban policy, Miss Granger." Folsom nodded abruptly and departed.

For a long moment, the only sound in the room came from the snap and crackle of the fire.

"Won't you sit, Mr. Malfoy?"

The security bubble inhibited the fire's heat so Lucius chose the chair nearest the hearth, barely refraining from rubbing his hands together. Once he was seated, Hermione sat in the facing chair, placing a curiously beaded bag on the occasional table at her side.

Lucius waited. Five years of relative isolation had taught him patience at least the semblance of patience.

"I'm sure you don't need to ask why I'm here."

"Indeed, Miss Granger, I haven't the faintest notion."

She practically gaped at him, but recovered quickly. "Doesn't Draco write to you every week?"

He arched an eyebrow, but his only remark was, "My son's letters are censored."

"They censor his letters?"

For some reason her naïveté amused him. "I am a prisoner, and Draco's status is probationary. Surely you didn't think we enjoyed an unexpurgated correspondence?" Her cheeks blossomed in a rosy flush and her eyes narrowed. Forestalling any outburst of temper, Lucius said, "Draco fills me in on the details of his life, Miss Granger, and my solicitor covers the wizarding world. Thus, it's safe to say I know as much as the average wizard."

"I see. I had counted on your having some.... I'm not certain where to start." She brushed nonexistent lint from the skirt of her robes. "Have you heard about Reconciliation

Act 21?"

"Not as such, no."

"Then if you don't mind, I'll give you a little background information."

"I am here at your convenience."

Hermione frowned at his tone before slipping her wand from the sleeve of her robes in a smooth, well-practiced motion. She whipped the vine wood in a series of arcs and loops.

Without realizing it Lucius had leaned forward at the second stroke of the familiar incantation. "Where did you learn that spell?" he asked sharply.

"Harry taught me."

"Potter?"

"He found it in a book that once belonged to Severus Snape. Horace Slughorn gave it to Harry our sixth year at Hogwarts." Lucius' attention was arrested for a moment by the profound sorrow which shadowed her expression, but then disparate facts slotted neatly into historic gaps, drawing an accurate picture of an altercation which had occurred in a girl's lavatory. Yet, before he said anything disparaging about the Boy Triumphant, Hermione spoke. "I was only given a short amount of time to meet with you, Mr. Malfoy, and if you don't mind, I'd like to get to the point."

He arched an eyebrow. "Do go on, Miss Granger."

"The recent unpleasantness, as so many are terming it these days, has had profound effects on the magical population, and over the past four years there have been several attempts to boost the birth rate."

"Tax incentives? The *Daily Prophet* running articles on the bucolic joys of family life?" Idly, he traced the upholstered seam in the arm of his chair, and he noticed her eyes following the movement of his fingers.

"Exactly," she said, changing the slant of her focus to his face. "Yet, according to several factions, these efforts haven't been enough. Last year, a new proposal was bandied about. I heard rumors mostly, and was sure the idiocy of the proposal would die of natural causes."

"I take it you were wrong."

She muffled a bitter laugh. "Regrettably. I don't know where it originated, but Reconciliation Act 21 is a marriage law."

"The Ministry is offering benefits to those who marry? I fail to see its offense." Lucius' voice took on a sardonic twist. "Surely you are not against the noble institution of marriage."

She shook her head, her curls undulating like ever-widening ripples on a pond. "You don't understand. I can't believe Draco didn't tell you. Mr. Malfoy, the proposed law would, in effect, force people like Draco to marry people like ... well ... me. Pureblood to Muggle-born."

"Ridiculous!" His already wounded dogma shrieked in mortal extremis.

Hermione went rigid. "I see." She rose to her feet. "This was a mistake."

If she left, he would lose whatever inside information she might reveal, and he couldn't protect Draco without that knowledge. Lucius ignored his rather poor track record; every time he attempted to protect his family, his efforts landed him in front of the Wizengamot or in Azkaban. "You mistake me."

"Do I?" she asked skeptically.

"Indeed." She didn't move although she was poised to depart, and Lucius realized Cromwell's assessment of her character was entirely on point. *Honorable. Intelligent. Self-sacrificing.* In other circumstances he would have smiled and added tenacious to the list. "I beg your pardon, Miss Granger," he said smoothly. "I was not referring to you, or even to any hypothetical marriage between you and Draco. There are simply too many pureblood families to let this law pass. Surely Shacklebolt--" Her expression stilled his tongue.

"How ironic that I wish it were true, Mr. Malfoy," she said, her words precise. "In fact, Muggle-borns and purebloods are allies in this fight, but the Ministry has found a new argument which just might persuade the Wizengamot to pass this atrocious referendum."

"A new argument?" His tone was encouraging, but not overtly so. "One which forces diametrically opposed factions to marry and procreate?"

"As startling as it may seem." There was an edge to her tone, but Hermione perched on the chair, engaged in spite of her obvious reservations. "The pro-marriage-law faction is relying heavily upon studies from St. Mungo's which chart the rise of Squib births in pureblood families, and the decrease of those births in half-bloods."

Lucius stared. "Is there such a report?"

"Oh, yes. I ... er ... acquired a copy." As she spoke, she retrieved a sheaf of parchment from her seemingly too-small bag.

Despite their own adversarial history, Lucius nearly chuckled at her choice of words, and what she so carefully did not say. Instead, he remarked, "Interesting bag."

"You have no idea." She smiled, holding out her arm to offer him the report. Hermione's smile dropped from her lips when he leaned away from her. "I wasn't going to touch you," she said, her voice tight and sharp.

"The security bubble," he replied. She would have to grow a thicker skin, he thought, watching her too-expressive face. He saw comprehension replace hurt and he took advantage of her vulnerability. "The results would be entirely unpleasant for me, I assure you."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Sorry. Is it just me? Can you touch the report at all? What if I put it on the table?"

"That would be sufficient; as long as you and I are not touching the item simultaneously."

She crossed to the nearest table, laying the report on its scarred surface. "Paranoid about Portkeys are they?"

"Amongst other things." Lucius rose from his seat, perversely satisfied when she seemed to retreat from his advance. He raised an eyebrow in silent query.

"I don't want you to be hurt on my account."

"Generous of you, Miss Granger." He glanced at the cover sheet before taking the report back to his chair. "In the interests of time, what does it say?"

"That's the remarkable thing. The Arithmancy is accurate as far as I can tell, but when I looked at the raw data and results I found something no one seems to have taken into account."

Balancing the report on the arm of his chair, Lucius said, "You'll understand if I ask why you've brought it to me."

She tilted her chin exactly as he had seen her do in the courtroom six years before, and then she resumed her seat, not at all hesitant about reaching her hands toward the fire for its warmth. "No one will listen to me. I'm not a Healer, and I don't have the training. I was told to leave it alone. To accept the terms of the Act because it means that when Ron and I marry we'll receive enough tax breaks to afford a house sooner than we might otherwise. As if that's the only reason I'd marry Ron." She bit her lip. "I beg your pardon. That's a bit too much information."

He controlled his desire to chuckle. "Your frustration is understandable, your goal even dare I say noble. But again, I ask you why you've come to me."

"Because none of the other pureblooded prisoners will speak with me. Because no one will take me seriously." Emotion drove her answer, and her cheeks flushed with frustration. "Because I've been told my questions step beyond the bounds of familial privacy and personal grief. Because I was told I'm a nosy know-it-all and I'm being intrusive!"

"I see." Lucius angled his head and looked at her. She was a rising star if her ability to arrange an audience with him was anything to measure. She was marrying into a well-respected pureblood family. She was easy on the eyes; heavier now, her body had ripened into womanhood. Her fragrance was floral, but not cloying. He inhaled, letting her fresh scent override the staleness of their surroundings. Yet, it was not these outer trappings of nascent adulthood which made Lucius seriously consider her request.

It was her potential.

Hermione bore his scrutiny patiently, her hands crossed in her lap, her brown eyes meeting his curiosity with an opaque wall which showed her to be an avid student of Occlumency. He nodded and she smirked.

Then he stared at the report balancing on the arm of his chair. After several moments, the fire crackled in the grate, sparks popping as heat ignited the natural oils in the wood.

Finally, Lucius raised his head and asked, "What do you wish to know?"

Hermione heaved a sigh of relief and smiled widely, and he was reminded that Draco had once found her exceedingly pretty.

"First," she said, "let me explain what I noticed in St. Mungo's research. It included data on the rise of stillbirths and Squibs, and in an overwhelming majority of Squib births the mothers were over the age of forty-five."

Lucius had stiffened during her comment, and he said coldly, "If this is the crux of your case, you've wasted my time. Wizarding longevity is --"

"Please hear me out!" she implored.

He barely heard her. She had unknowingly re-opened a long-unhealed wound by mentioning stillbirths. Even now, after so many years, Lucius could see the pale face of his firstborn in his mind's eye. A son. A perfect, miniature imitation of his father. But young Abraxas had been stillborn.

Nothing in his pampered life had prepared Lucius for the pain of such a loss. That the devastation coincided with the birth of young Percival Ignatius Weasley had solidified Lucius' dislike of his cousin, Arthur. The cousins, Arthur and Lucius, had competed since they were children. Quidditch, school marks, wives but in this one thing, the most important of all, Arthur had succeeded where Lucius had not.

Abraxas Malfoy, senior, had never let an occasion pass when he could praise his nephew, Arthur, for his intelligence, compassion, and even his tolerance of Muggles and their culture. Abraxas had waxed lyrical over his perceived evidence of Arthur's *noblesse oblige*.

By the time Draco had been born, after three additional stillbirths taxed Narcissa's constitution to the breaking point, Lucius had loathed Arthur and all that he stood for.

Hermione Granger's regurgitation of information rolled over him, a soothing blanket of facts, figures and information he would remember and consider later.

"Muggle-borns and half-bloods tend to have children at an earlier age than purebloods, possibly a result of cultural conditioning from their Muggle families whose lifespans are so much shorter." She rummaged in her beaded bag and retrieved a scroll. "What you may or may not know, Mr. Malfoy, is that there's a chromosomal disorder occurring in all human populations which causes cognitive and physical impairment. I think it exists in the magical community, only we call those children Squibs."

Lucius refocused his mind at her last statement, a terrible truth forming in his mind as she spoke.

"The syndrome is passed from generation to generation, and its cause is directly linked to the age of the mother."

She paused, and Lucius was astute enough to realize this was the reason she had come. "And the question you would ask, Miss Granger?"

Her fingers twisted together. "How old was your mother when she gave birth to your brother?"

Despite being prepared, flags of temper flew high on Lucius' cheekbones, and he noticed Hermione's hand tighten on her wand. When he spoke his tone was as frigid as the corridors of his prison home. "It seems my son has forgotten how to hold his tongue."

"Draco would like to have freedom in his choice of wives," she replied hotly.

"You said you weren't interested in becoming Draco's wife."

She held her hand to forestall any further outburst on his part, but then said bitingly, "Let me reassure you that I have no interest in marrying your son. I am already engaged to another man."

Lucius was quite pleased she didn't say the unspoken 'a better man', because then he would have been forced to walk out, and that would have been counter-productive. If the law passed, Draco would still be subject to its terms.

"Look, Mr. Malfoy, Draco was the one who suggested I speak with you in the first place."

Lucius deliberately relaxed his shoulders and unclenched his jaw. "Why didn't you say so at the outset?"

"I had hoped to acquire your help based on the merits of my argument alone."

He snorted. "While I might admire your sentiment, it would have been less foolhardy had you told me Draco sent you."

She sniffed in irritation. "Evidently."

"I fail to see why you should come to me when Draco could have asked my mother."

"Apparently her portrait refuses to speak to him."

"I see." He paused for a moment, a smile tugging at his lips in fond remembrance.

"You do?"

While contemplating his answer, three logs rose from the stack on the hearth and settled onto the dying fire. A flare of sparks rose up the chimney, and Lucius watched the fresh wood ignite. Then he spoke. "My mother was quite sensitive about her age, and a devotee of the Cult of Beauty. She would deem Draco's question a great impertinence. But to answer your question, Miss Granger, my mother was in her fifties when Marcus was born."

She retrieved quill and ink from her bag. "I'm very sorry to ask, but could you be more precise? I'd like to have as accurate information as possible."

"She was fifty-six when Marcus was born. And she was sixty-five when he died." Lucius ran his fingers through the velvety nap of his too-short hair, and remembered his brother. An odd-looking child, Marcus had been relegated to a suite of rooms in the manor's guest wing where he was attended by house-elves for the majority of his short life. Neither Abraxas nor Catherine had spent time with their younger son, but Lucius had adored the quirky little boy. Although forbidden, when Lucius was home from school he would sneak into Marcus' rooms to read him bedtime stories. Marcus had died shortly after his ninth birthday, within weeks of the family Healer confirming the second Malfoy son was a Squib.

Abruptly, Lucius leafed through the St. Mungo's report conveniently flagged with a magical color-coded charm (neatly annotated on the front sheet) to open at specific pages. He scanned the data and three relevant graphs. "This is the sample on which you intend to base your argument?" When Hermione didn't respond immediately, he said, "It's premature of you to draw a correlation between a *Muggle* dysfunction and a magical one with such scant information. Utterly irresponsible."

Huffing in annoyance, Hermione corked her bottle of ink before rising to place an additional scroll on the table. "Look at this, Mr. Malfoy. The correlation is NOT erroneous, nor is it premature. St. Mungo's research clearly supports my theory. What I'm trying what I want to do is bury the Wizengamot with irrefutable data and an inescapable conclusion!" Hermione leaned forward, too intelligent eyes boring into his. "If I could only get people to talk to me! I don't want to air their dirty laundry in public. I want to ensure that each of us has the freedom to choose who and when to marry, and when and if to have children. Governments shouldn't be allowed to dictate the private lives of its citizenry."

"Why, Miss Granger..." Lucius retrieved the scroll, then leaned back in his chair to peruse its contents, "...what a revolutionary concept."

Reflected firelight glimmered in her dark eyes. "I'm so used to..."

"Being at odds with your closest friends and allies? Bouncing off the shielding spells of bureaucracy? Crusading against oppressors who would turn you into a brood mare?"

Her eyes flicked to the sleeve of his left arm, and she said only, "In a word, yes."

He clenched his teeth, but managed to say civilly enough, "If your hypothesis is true, and I'll grant that it appears likely, then its impact on the magical community will be profound. Although, I fail to see how it will derail the Reconciliation Act."

"The only reason the Act has survived is the overriding fear of Squib births. If I can show they aren't inherent in purebloods, but that Squib births exist across magical society, regardless of economic or blood status, then I believe the Act will lose the support it's gained."

He pursed his lips, and after a moment, he said, "A not unreasonable supposition."

"The St. Mungo's sample was confined to purebloods, and even then, only select families were represented. On my own, I traced the Squib sister of Sirius and Regulus Black. Mrs. Black was sixty when she gave birth to Aurelia. I don't know how she died, but her name was blasted off the family tapestry, and Kreacher, Harry's house-elf, takes flowers to her grave every month." She indicated the scroll he held. "You'll notice that my data represents almost all pureblood families."

Lucius read her work more closely, grudgingly impressed. His fingers traced the careful Arithmantic formulae, the neatly graphed data and results. "You've been quite thorough with the available information."

"Thank you." She paused, and then asked, "May I include the information you've given me?"

Re-rolling the scroll, Lucius rose to his feet and returned it and the copy of the St. Mungo's report to the nearby table for her to collect. Then he stepped next to the hearth, soaking in the warmth from the fire. At this range, the security bubble's interference was negligible. "You may," he replied, turning his head to look at her. "I doubt my former colleagues will provide you with the information you need, however, you may use my name."

Her eyes shone, and he didn't need Legilimency to know she was pleased.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Malfoy."

He heard a distinctive heavy gait outside the room heralding Folsom's return, but Hermione was busy putting her things into her little bag. Lucius said, "If I may suggest..." she turned her head in his direction, and he continued, "...tell them up front that you've had my cooperation. They'll expect that sort of approach from you."

Affronted, she straightened. "Because I'm Muggle-born and have no tact?"

He waited until the door swung open and Folsom gestured for him to follow before he said, "Because you're a Gryffindor."

~o0o~

*Excerpts from a Letter written to Lucius Malfoy, inmate A294365789, Azkaban Prison, Azkaban Island, North Sea by Hermione Granger, Undersecretary to Augustus Prewett, Sixth Floor, Department of Justice, Ministry of Magic, London, England*

*Dear Mr. Malfoy,*

*I hope you will forgive my presumption at adding myself to your list of approved correspondents. That may be rectified easily. However, I was informed I would not be granted leave to visit in the future it wouldn't look right considering my new position and I saw no other recourse to keeping you informed of my progress on that little matter we discussed.*

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*Once Draco arranged for me to meet with Mr. Cromwell, my task was significantly easier, and I took your final advice to heart. I was direct, but tactful, in my letters to the others, and with a single exception, was able to gather the necessary genealogical information. I doubt that you or anyone will have a chance to see my results in print. I hope that in time I'll be able to present them to St. Mungo's where ...*

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*It only occurred to me later that the proposal could have had more immediate consequences than I initially represented to you. I hadn't taken into account your own matrimonial state.*

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*I'm sure he'll have already told you, but Draco and Astoria's wedding was brilliant. I wouldn't normally be on the guest list, but Astoria and I are members of the Hogwarts Rebuilding Committee ...*

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*If we don't speak in the future - neither Ron nor Harry know I'm writing to you - please allow me to thank you once again for your assistance and advice, and accept my good wishes for your future.*

*Sincerely,*

*Hermione Granger*

~o0o~

The first time she saw him after his release from Azkaban was in the halls of the Ministry of Magic. Hermione had been about to turn left into the long corridor leading to the Law Enforcement Division when she heard the unmistakable plummy tones of Lucius Malfoy's voice. Most of what he said was indistinct, but when he sneered the words 'pedigree' and 'inferior birth' her forward motion halted.

A vaguely familiar voice asked, "What are you saying, Malfoy?"

"Offspring will always carry the taint of an inferior mother."

Hermione winced and smoothed her hand over the gentle swell of tummy, her wedding ring gleaming in the torchlight of the hallway sconces. While she had never harbored any real belief that Malfoy's prejudice was mutable, she had, nonetheless, hoped their brief collaboration instigated something resembling tolerance.

It appeared she was wrong. Again.

Ron often chided her about her wide-eyed idealism, saying she should stop giving people the benefit of the doubt when they didn't deserve one. Generally, such a discussion ended in sharp words, wounded feelings, and Ron slamming the door as he went to the pub.

Still, Lucius' denigrating comment about tainted pedigrees stung, and in a bout of un-Gryffindorish cowardice, Hermione debated whether to turn back toward the elevators.

Around the corner, Malfoy's companion spoke. "One doesn't embrace new concepts easily."

"Understandable, Carstairs," Malfoy replied.

Pontius Carstairs. Senior member of Malfoy's legal firm. Hermione knew him by sight, reputation, and professional encounter. His bloodlines were as pure as the Malfoys and considerably less tainted by a Dark reputation. Carstairs said, "My family has always taken the pedigree of the female line into account."

Inexplicably dejected, Hermione spun on the balls of her feet. Perhaps an early lunch was in order, or a trip to Flourish and Blotts to pick up a copy of *You and Your Magical Baby: the First Years*.

"I haven't asked you to abandon your long-held ideals about bloodlines," Lucius commented. "I merely suggest you consider the concept of hybridization and its breeding advantages."

Hermione paused in her flight, her head and upper body turning back toward the overheard conversation. *Hybridization? What does Malfoy know about hybridization?*

Carstairs asked, "You've decided to continue Abraxas' breeding program then?"

"With suitable modifications."

"I had always thought your interest feigned."

Lucius' tone grew less friendly, and Hermione would later wonder that she knew him well enough to distinguish the difference. "I had other duties," was his chilly reply. "I have recently had an abundance of leisure time."

Carstairs cleared his throat. "Of course."

Suddenly the two men reached the corridor intersection, their voices morphing into physical embodiment. They turned into the corridor where Hermione stood in the unflattering and all-too-revealing attitude of an about-face. Lucius' eyes flicked to the wedding ring on her hand, and the burgeoning life misshaping her russet robes. "Madam Granger," he said.

The elderly solicitor gave his companion a pointed glance before he spoke. "Madam Weasley, what a pleasure to see you."

"Mr. Malfoy," she replied, nodding to both wizards, "Mr. Carstairs."

Lucius leaned on a cane, the picture of aristocratic aplomb, and Hermione considered how remarkably well he suited his surroundings, regardless of venue. His envy-worthy hair had grown out from its prison burr. Unlike hers, charmed into a thick chignon at the base of her neck, his hair hung loosely around his shoulders, a draping of palest silk. His robes were tailored to his lean silhouette and he wore the latest in wizarding neckware a blue cravat which enhanced the color of his eyes.

Assessing him was the work of an instant. Later, Hermione wouldn't be able to recall a single thing about Carstairs' appearance, but she rationalized her lack of attention on the number of years it had been since she'd seen Lucius Malfoy.

Before the situation could become awkward, Carstairs said, "I must be off; I have an appointment on the hour. I look forward to discussing this further, Lucius. Perhaps I'll introduce one of your hybrid peahens next season." He smiled at Hermione, his face wrinkling into familiar, oft-used lines. "As I said, it was a pleasure, Madam Weasley."



Good day." With a brief, final nod, he strode down the corridor, his robes billowing in a manner reminiscent of Hogwarts' dungeons and their most infamous Potions master.

Lucius' eyes followed the rapid retreat of his solicitor, and then they shifted to Hermione. "It seems congratulations are in order, Madam Granger," Lucius said.

"It's Weasley."

"Indeed."

Ignoring his slur, Hermione smiled. "Congratulations to you as well, Mr. Malfoy."

"Pardon?"

"Astoria and I are due the same week and we both see Healer Bones. I imagine you'll be as doting a grandfather as Arthur." When she noticed Lucius' grip on his cane tighten, his knuckles standing out in whitened relief, Hermione took a wary step back. She might not be afraid, exactly, but he had been her enemy not so many years before.

Lucius noticed her reflexive action. He flinched, but recovered his composure, his expression a mask of polite indifference. "I beg your pardon."

"It's not necessary. I don't know what I said to offend you ..."

"It's no matter, Miss ... Madam." He nodded curtly and angled to the side, as if only just then aware he blocked her path, but Hermione was no longer interested in a rapid departure.

"No, really," she said, earnestly. "I am very sorry to have offended you."

"Not at all."

"Then did I commit some *faux pas* by referring to Astoria's pregnancy?"

"Again, not at all. I'm quite pleased for Draco and my daughter-in-law."

"I know they're very happy. As happy as Ron and I are."

"It seems the Weasleys' father and sons -- have great felicity when it comes to family." Lucius straightened, lifting his cane as if ready to move on. He inclined his head, and Hermione noticed the tightness of his smile. It was then she remembered an altercation from her childhood, when two seemingly rational, albeit antagonistic, adult men had thrown themselves at one another in Flourish and Blotts. Knowledge of that moment, and her recollection, flashed in his pale eyes, and Lucius said, "I'm keeping you from your duties."

Incongruously, Hermione didn't want their encounter to end on so discordant a note. Flailing for a topic, she blurted, "Were you talking about peacocks just now?"

He raised an eyebrow, clearly taken by surprise, and unaccountably fell in step with her as she turned toward her office. "Have you an interest in peafowl?"

"Not really. It's just that I couldn't help but notice..." she broke off and looked away, "...that is, I overheard"

A smirk lifted the corner of his mouth. "Eavesdropping, Madam?"

"No!" But her pink cheeks gave her away, and the rigidity of Lucius' smile softened into something more approachable, even if his amusement was at her expense. She rushed on. "Well -- not intentionally. You mentioned hybridization."

"A relatively new venture."

"It's ... er ... encouraging."

"Encouraging?" he asked, raising a brow.

Wishing she could wipe the amused expression from his face, Hermione instead succumbed to a flux in her mood; pregnancy hormones struck at inconvenient times. She glanced at the open doorway to her office just beyond the intersecting hallways, and blinked rapidly, holding the sudden onset of tears at bay. "Look, I must go," she said, and even she could hear the quaver in her voice.

Lucius' smirk dropped like Viktor Krum after being hit by a rogue bludger in a World Cup match. "Are you feeling quite well?" he asked. His hand was at her elbow, strong and sure, as he escorted her to the nearest doorway, which was, thankfully, her own office.

"I'm fine." She didn't meet his eyes, but allowed him to guide her to the guest chair, whose mound of files was whisked to a hastily transfigured side-table by Lucius' quick wand-work. In some part of her mind she wondered if he had just set a precedent. "Thank you for your trouble, Mr. Malfoy."

"It was no trouble, I assure you. Undoubtedly a cup of tea would help."

His solicitousness was a surprise. "It should wait until after I see the head mugwump," she said. "It's where I was going when "

"You overheard my understandably fascinating discussion about revolutionizing peafowl husbandry."

Her overset emotions seemed to careen from one extreme to another, but she managed a genuine, if shaky, smile. "Yes. And your willingness to embrace hybridization--"

"I'm always interested in the betterment of my bloodlines," he said. And then Hermione was treated to a remarkable sight. Lucius Malfoy blushed.

Graciously, she said nothing about the conversational precipice upon which they were perched. Instead, she offered to postpone her meeting and invited him to join her for that cup of tea.

"Thank you, no," he replied. "I shan't take more of your time, Madam. As long as you're well?" His eyes raked her from head to toe, and his expression softened.

"I assure you I'm quite all right. I appreciate your concern."

He looked disconcerted. "I will say good day to you, then."

Hermione stared at the empty doorway for a long moment after he disappeared. Her thoughts revisited the overheard discussion and their own, brief, conversation. She had been unwilling to mention the correlation between fowl and humans, although in a man as intelligent as Lucius, there was no doubt he had either drawn the conclusion himself, or would soon enough.

She was right after all.

Lucius Malfoy had learned something, but there was no way Hermione would tell Ron. Two topics were guaranteed to get a negative reaction from him. Viktor Krum was the first. Any Malfoy was the other. In the interests of family harmony, Hermione would keep the pleasure of discovering Lucius Malfoy's broadening perspectives to herself.

Her smile was smug as she summoned her tea pot from the sideboard.

~o0o~

*Excerpts from a Letter written to Draco Malfoy, the Breakfast Room overlooking the drive, the Grange, Medstead, Hampshire, England, by Lucius Malfoy, the Drawing Room, Carlton House, Johannesburg, South Africa*

*I appreciate your willingness to be my ambassador in this, Draco, and once again, I do not wish to be acknowledged. My satisfaction will come from knowing the gift has been received.*

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*Expect the delivery Saturday. If the crate does not contain one hybrid peahen and one white peacock -- do NOT name them Rose and Scorpius, as you so amusingly suggested -- let me know immediately. Not only will I remedy the oversight, but I will know why my steward has become derelict in his duty to the Estate.*

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*I quite agree. Scorpius is the most winsome baby I've ever seen ... saving yourself, of course. He reminds me of you with that tuft of white hair, and I do hope his eyes remain blue.*

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*My business here shall be concluded within the week, and I expect to return to England Wednesday next. In the meantime, give my warmest regards to your wife and my doting admiration to your son.*

*I remain, as ever, affectionately, your father,*

*Lucius*

~o0o~

## Two

### *Chapter 2 of 3*

For some, a paradigm shift takes a fraction of a second. For Lucius Malfoy, that fraction of a second is three decades in the making.

**Title: The White Peacock**

**Author: Bambu**

AN: Please note, there are several quotes taken directly from 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows', and they have been bolded.

~o0o~

The next time he saw her it was winter. Lucius didn't recognize her at first; her abundant hair was shoved under a knitted cap the color of the leaden sky. And then, when she removed her scarf, Lucius saw a thin white scar on her throat ... exactly where Bellatrix had cut her in his drawing room twelve years before.

Of all the people he might have encountered at this time and in this location, Hermione Granger Lucius would never call her Weasley wasn't even on his list.

It had been a few years since he'd seen her, and motherhood had completed her transformation from the coltish young woman she'd been. She still had fine features of the sort which appear plain or beautiful depending on the circumstances. Several tiny scars marred her smooth skin which he'd never noticed; one, a small indentation just beneath the arch of her left eyebrow. Another dimpled her lower lip.

Lucius frowned. The scars' existence was disquieting, although he didn't quite know why. From knowledge born of painful experience he knew they weren't recent. He stared, tracing the tiny scars there were seven looking for a pattern. There was none. It was as if something had struck her in the face without her attempting to protect herself.

Then, as if *Lumos* had been cast on the cob-webbed corners of his mind, an individual moment stood out in bas-relief: the prisoners' escape from his home during the last days of the war. The chandelier in the manor's drawing room had fallen on Hermione during her rescue. She had been unconscious at the time.

Remembering Voldemort's unleashed fury when he'd arrived scant moments later, Lucius' shoulders hunched, and he shied away from the memory of his willingness to debase himself in front of the unstable Dark Lord. Lucius would have, and had, done everything within his means to keep his family alive.

Unaware of his presence, Hermione knelt in the snow, brushing off a headstone with her scarf. "I know I missed last year..." her voice carried over the odd stillness of the cold day, "...but I was unavoidably detained. I went into labor early. I had a boy, and we named him Hugo for my father, although Ron wanted to name him after Paddy Moran. I don't even like Quidditch. If I hadn't just given birth, I'm sure Ron would still be arguing about it."

She continued to tend the small grave mundanely, and Lucius curled his lip, wondering why she didn't use her wand. As Hermione worked, he considered his knowledge of her. She had married above her station, her daughter was two days younger than his grandson Scorpius, and now, he knew she'd named her son after her Muggle father.

Lucius was more familiar with her professional achievements. Pontius Carstairs thought highly of her, and she was a rising star in the world of Magical Law Enforcement. Once she'd become Deputy Director of the department, with dotted line oversight of the Auror program, the impromptu raids on Malfoy Manor had lessened considerably. In fact, there hadn't been one in over a year.

He should probably thank her. Instead, Lucius stood just outside the wrought iron gate leading to the Hogsmeade Cemetery, staring at the woman solely responsible for shoving the thin end of a wedge into the holdfast of his prejudice.

At that moment, Hermione shook her arm, dropping her wand into her hand. With a smile curving her lips, she cut swift wand strokes in the air, gathering the snow covering the grave into a pile at her knees, and then forming it into a miniature sculpture. Lucius admired her technique, but reminded of his own purpose, he opened the well-oiled gate and entered the graveyard.

As if a telltale had been tripped, Hermione reacted. Her wand sketched a defensive rune and a modified *Protego* created a wall of protection around her before she rose to meet whatever potential challenge faced her. When she recognized him she dropped her spell. Lucius arched an eyebrow, recalling a time that show of trust would have culminated in her death. "It seems several years of peace haven't blunted your reflexes."

"Thankfully," she replied, and as she spoke, her small scars disappeared under a subtle, non-verbal Concealing Charm.

"Wasn't it a rather energetic reaction to an unexpected arrival? I might have been anyone." Hermione's eyes flicked to his left sleeve, and when he spoke, his voice was as frigid as the ground upon which she knelt. "Point taken, Madam."

"No!" Hermione scrambled to her feet, absently kicking her proto-sculpture in the process. Snow fell in clumps and what appeared to be a head sheared off to land in a quiet *flump* on the hem of her cloak. "You misunderstand."

"Do I?" He took two steps to the left, choosing a path leading away from her.

"The spell isn't keyed to you, or ... er ... ex-Death Eaters, *per se*."

"Then--?"

"It's keyed to anyone who enters the graveyard with the intent of visiting Professor Snape's grave."

Lucius relaxed marginally. "Trouble with vandalism?"

"And zealous admirers."

"Admirers?"

She dusted the knees of her dark woolen cloak, and Lucius idly watched the snow puff and fall around her bare fingers. "You'd be surprised," she said. "On four separate occasions, we've apprehended witches in the midst of digging up his coffin. The most recent spent a year brewing enough Polyjuice potion to last her husband several months."

Lucius shuddered. "Revolting."

"I couldn't agree more. In any event, MLE reinforced its protections on the cemetery." She smiled then, her eyes sparkling. "As a result, there's been a decline in the number of petty defacements, especially at Samhain."

"An unexpected perquisite," he replied.

"Definitely." She glanced at the pile of slush at her feet, pouting in a moue of disappointment, but then she returned her attention to Lucius. "There are both specific and broad applications of the charm, and it's been put to use at Ottery St. Catchpole and the National Cemetery outside London."

Lucius leaned on his cane, the tip settling into the groove between bricks, and pursed his lips for a brief moment. "I assume the charm was developed by the Department of Mysteries."

"Actually, no. It was developed privately."

"Indeed. And you're privy to the information." The last word was said in a lilt, transforming his statement into a question.

"Of course I am."

"Will you give me the name of the charm's creator?"

She arched an eyebrow; Lucius noted it was the one with the invisible scar. "Why?" she asked.

Remembering her natural curiosity, he contained his incipient irritation. "The Malfoy Monument has been desecrated numerous times since the end of the war."

Hermione's eyes widened. "I had no idea. Have you reported it? No, of course you haven't." She was thoughtful enough not to pursue that line of query, and Lucius thought she might have begun to learn tact. Then she smiled and said, "My brothers-in-law developed the charm. Bill's a curse-breaker for Gringotts and George is quite an inventor. If you'd like, I'll speak with them on your behalf."

"The Weasley brothers?" He smiled thinly. "Don't trouble yourself." Hermione's open expression shuttered and awkward silence blanketed them. It was then Lucius noticed how cold he had grown during their chat. "I'll bid you good day, Madam."

"Good-bye, Mr. Malfoy." After a moment she added, "Happy new year."

Lucius resumed his course, following the path kept clear by permanent charms until he took a byway, weaving between the rows of headstones, peering at names while searching for one in particular. Unlike Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape hadn't received an ostentatious memorial. His headstone was of modest size and made of excellent quality marble the first, and to date, only, joint venture between the Potter and Malfoy families.

Lucius hadn't been to Severus' grave since he'd first been released from Azkaban, yet he'd succumbed to sentiment that very morning when he had realized it was Severus's birthday. It irked Lucius that he couldn't find the blasted grave. He was on the verge of drawing his wand and casting a Locator Spell, no matter how embarrassing it would be in front of a witness.

"Mr. Malfoy?" Hermione called out.

"Yes?" He turned in her direction. She hadn't resumed her earlier work, but had been staring after him, puzzlement clearly writ upon her features. "Aren't you visiting Professor Snape?"

"I believe we established that fact."

She pointed to the grave where she stood. "He's right here."

"I see," he said in that tone which meant he didn't see at all, but he altered course. When he drew near, she said, "If you'll give me a moment, I'll be leaving."

"I wouldn't want to interrupt." He leaned on his cane. "You clearly haven't finished."

She blushed. "It's all right. I try to come every year on his birthday."

*Do you?*, he thought. Aloud he said, "And when vandals break into his resting place."

"And when vandals desecrate his resting place." She patted the headstone affectionately.

He narrowed his eyes. She was Muggle-born like Lily Potter. She was highly intelligent like Lily Potter. She was linked intimately if not carnally with James Potter's son. He remembered James Potter, and Severus' heartache. "Just what was Severus Snape to you?" he asked sharply.

"Not that it's your business, but he saved my life. Mine and Harry's and Ron's." Her chin tilted, her eyes glittered with unexpressed emotion. "I deeply regret his death."

Lucius loathed the seeming inequity which colored every one of their recent meetings. "I shall return when you have finished, Madam," he said, the words stiff and formal.

"It's all right. I won't take long." She glanced at a watch cleverly strapped to her wrist. "The children will be waking from their naps any time." He saw her notice his flinch when she said 'children', but to her credit she said nothing. Not even to offer condolences over Draco and Astoria's recent miscarriage.

She was definitely learning tact. How un-Gryffindor.

Without further comment, Hermione pointed her wand at the mess from her earlier, interrupted attempt and cast a silent *Evanescio* before starting over. With one flick of her wrist a cube of pristine snow rose from the ground beyond the cemetery, levitated through the air, and then plopped at her feet. Fascinated, Lucius watched while she half-transfigured, half-sculpted the snow into an ice figurine standing guard over Severus' grave. It was in the shape of a doe.

Lucius cleared his throat. "How very fitting, Miss Madam."

"He was very loyal to those he loved."

"Indeed he was."

"We should all be so lucky." Hermione's clear, brown eyes met his without accusation or suspicion.

"Draco was."

"Yes, he was," she replied softly.

Lucius looked at the dates carved into the headstone and regretted a great many things. Next to him, Hermione swooped to retrieve her brightly-hued scarf, abandoned when she had initially faced Lucius, and then wrapped it around her neck. She patted the headstone, said, "Happy Birthday, Professor," before turning toward Lucius, smiling. "It was nice to see you again, Mr. Malfoy."

"Thank you." He inclined his head. "May I say the same."

"You may."

"I beg your pardon?"

She laughed, and he was amazed by her audacity. Very few people teased him. Lucius ignored the rush of pleasure that accompanied the realization.

"You asked if you could say the same thing. You didn't actually say it, and I was giving you permission."

His lips twitched. "It has certainly been memorable."

Hermione laughed again, and made her exit. Just before she Disapparated, she waved.

Lucius looked down at Severus Snape's headstone for a long moment. When he left the cemetery ten minutes later, Hermione's sculpture had been transfigured into something more permanent than ice.

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*Excerpts from a Letter written to Draco Malfoy, strolling the Promenade, the Grange, Medstead, Hampshire, England by William Weasley, Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes, no. 93 Diagon Alley, London, England*

*Dear Mr. Malfoy,*

*At the request of my sister-in-law, I am enclosing a license agreement for the Nuisance Reduction Charm. The terms of use for this charm are listed herein, but in general, the term of the license is in perpetuity, and your use of the charm is restricted to the Malfoy family mausoleum and any adjunct family memorials or graves.*

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*The wand motions for applying the NRC should be rudimentary for a wizard of your capabilities; a variation on an ancient Egyptian Curse and a standard Keep Away Spell. You will find their specifics on the attachment; however ....*

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*Let me reiterate, this license is for the Malfoy family exclusively, and there will be no fee for your family's use. Any infringements on the terms of the agreement, not that we anticipate such an event, will be investigated to the full extent of the law.*

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*Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me, or my brother George. Correspondence can reach us at any Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes.*

*It won't do you any good to ask why, Malfoy. Hermione isn't telling.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*William A. Weasley*

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The next time he saw her Lucius was cloaked by a Disillusionment spell. Platform 9 3/4 was a hub of activity, the Hogwarts Express huffing steam and vapor like a Ukrainian Ironbelly. He had made a promise to his grandson to see him off for his first year of school. Only for Scorpius would Lucius hide in public.

The tremendous amount of steam pouring from the scarlet engine aided rather than hindered his efforts, and as Lucius squatted next to Scorpius, he was certain of his obscurity. "I will write to you every week, and I expect you to do the same."

Scorpius glanced around him nervously, and then looked up at his father. "Yes, sir. I will."

Draco placed his hand on his son's shoulder, angling his body in such a way no one could read Scorpius' lips should anyone be watching. Subterfuge didn't come naturally to Scorpius, who heaved a sigh of relief and stared blindly in the direction of Lucius' voice when it said, "Remember your manners."

"I will." Scorpius nodded, his flaxen fringe drooping to obscure his blue eyes from view. He whispered, "I'll miss you, Grandfa'."

Lucius briefly cupped the young boy's face. "And I you, Scorpius. I look forward to the holidays already. This year it's your turn to choose the tree for Yule."

Scorpius giggled when Lucius' knees cracked as he rose to his feet, and then it was Astoria's turn to have a few words with her son.

"I'll owl you later, Draco," Lucius murmured. Draco responded equally quietly, "Thank you for coming, Father."

"I wouldn't have missed it."

Instead of Apparating to Wiltshire, Lucius succumbed to nostalgic impulse, watching the departures taking place around him, reminded of his son's early, happier years. Before the Dark Lord's corporeal return.

As he meandered between family clutches, he marveled at the freedom from public censure his Disillusionment granted. Of course, he wasn't, by nature, the sort to hide from attention, but this day had been an exception to the rule, and Lucius enjoyed the novelty.

The train's dense vapor hid him as effectively as his charm, and by the time he'd reached the train's last car, a sneer had firmly affixed itself to his lips, and he knew why he didn't generally mingle with the masses. His tolerance for sentimentality was limited, and witnessing repetitive cloying farewells had taxed his forbearance.

**"Hermione didn't believe I could pass a Muggle driving test, did you?"**

Interest piqued, Lucius peered through the fog to locate the speaker whose tone carried a hint of challenge. When located, Lucius realized he was less than a handful of yards distant from the Potter and Weasley families, eight by his count, four adults and four children. He'd thought Potter had another son, but there was only one boy with Potter's messy hair in evidence.

Lucius was close enough to hear Hermione's response, **"I had complete faith in you."**

Yet, he was closer to her spouse.

Ron whispered, **"As a matter of fact, I did Confund him,"** to Harry as the two friends hefted a trunk and an owl in its cage onto the train.

As the domestic scene unfolded, Lucius' gaze was riveted to Hermione's expressive face. She had heard her husband's aside, and her body language and fleeting expression were too revealing. He recognized the tilt of her chin and the head-toss. Her hair rippled in response to her movement; it was shorter than when she'd interviewed him in Azkaban.

Intrigued, despite his better inclinations, Lucius paused by the car's open door, keeping it between him and the two families.

For some reason, Lucius hadn't seen Hermione since that day at Severus' graveside, but he had followed her career's astronomical climb with interest. She was one of the Ministry's youngest department heads, and couldn't have reached that pinnacle without perseverance, competence and influence in the right places. Hermione and Astoria had remained friendly, and on occasion, Astoria mentioned more personal details than were published in the *Daily Prophet* or *Witch Weekly*.

**"If you're not in Gryffindor, we'll disinherit you," said Ron, "but no pressure."**

**"Ron!"** Hermione chastised, her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkling with irritation. **"He doesn't mean it,"** she said to a young girl. If Hermione's tone was any indication, Lucius wagered she was accustomed to making excuses for her husband. For a moment, mother and daughter were united as they shared a long-suffering look.

Rose.

Lucius remembered the child's name from years before, when he'd sent Hermione two peafowl. She had never thanked him directly, but Draco had received an appropriate card.

Rose Weasley had her mother's features, but while she had inherited the Weasley coloring her genetic luck had held. There was only a light dusting of freckles across her nose. Her hair was thick, wavy and a deep mahogany, almost the color of the imported cocoa powder which dusted Lucius' favorite biscuits.

A younger boy, one who could only be Hermione Granger's son, stood to the side, speaking to a younger girl with vibrant red hair and green eyes.

**"Look who it is."** Ron's comment regained Lucius' attention. He followed the younger man's glance then gritted his teeth. They were looking at Draco. Hands itching to hex the misbegotten spawn of Arthur Weasley for his disdainful tone, Lucius reined in the inclination. He listened instead, his anger rising.

An exchange of head nods, and Ron spoke quietly, **"So that's little Scorpius."** Hermione, Lucius noticed, had smiled at Astoria and made a gesture which he interpreted as 'Floo me for tea soon', but her attention was diverted by her husband's next comment.

**"Make sure you beat him in every test, Rosie," Ron said. "Thank God you inherited your mother's brains."**

**"Ron, for heaven's sake," said Hermione. "Don't try to turn them against each other before they've even started school!"**

**"You're right, sorry," said Ron, but apparently unable to help himself, he added, "Don't get too friendly with him, though Rosie. Grandad Weasley would never forgive you if you married a pureblood."**

**"Hey!"** A dark-haired boy, the spitting image of Harry Potter, drew the families' attention from the topic of conversation, but Lucius watched Hermione quell her irritation. She pulled her daughter to the side, bending forward to speak quietly. Fortunately for Lucius, she'd moved closer to the car's door and him.

"Your Dad was just teasing, Rose. We'll be proud of you no matter where you're sorted, and you should make friends regardless of what house they're in."

"I know, Mum. You've told me before," Rose replied, but her eyes flicked to where her father stood chatting with her uncle and aunt.

Hermione's hand smoothed her daughter's hair, and Lucius admired the openly affectionate nature of the relationship. "Did I ever tell you I was almost sorted into Ravenclaw?" Hermione asked.

"You were?" Rose looked up. The innocent, trusting way she looked at her mother struck Lucius hard. It reminded him of Draco as a small child before politics had interfered in their lives and of the way Scorpius looked at his own father.

While Hermione explained that everyone had characteristics of all four Hogwarts houses and the hat took into account the student's own desires, Lucius turned so he could see his own family, regretting, suddenly and intensely, his having left them so soon.

The train's whistle blew and there was a scurry of activity on the platform as last minute farewells were said. In the distance, Scorpius abandoned his carefully taught manners and threw his arms around his father's waist. Draco hesitated for a fraction of a second, glancing right and left to see if anyone was watching, but then he returned his son's hug, his own expression one Lucius had never seen before. He blinked against the sting in his eyes, and told himself the steam from the train caused the reaction.

Lucius paid minimal attention to the nearby scramble of Weasleys and Potters, enough to avoid being detected, but not enough to follow their conversations. His eyes were focused on Scorpius kissing Astoria on the cheek, and then the little blond head was inside the train while Draco offered his wife a handkerchief to dry her tears.

Magically, doors slammed shut, and as the train chugged out of the station, Draco and Astoria were among the first to Disapparate. The remaining Potters and Weasleys disbanded, the Potters with jovial waves and smiles, Ron departing with his curly-haired son in tow, "Are you really going to let me ride your broom, Dad?" and a negligent farewell to his wife. "See you tonight, Hermione."

Hermione, Lucius noted, remained on the edge of the platform staring at the plume of smoke disappearing in the distance, the very picture of an anxious mother watching her first-born leave on the train. Even the glimmer of her tears added verisimilitude to the impression. Except Lucius had been there for the entire episode, and he had seen the moments her façade cracked, when her frustration and disappointment had shown through. He doubted anyone else had noticed.

He respected her enough to leave her in peace. Regrettably, however, he hadn't counted on the way the sound of his footsteps would carry on the nearly deserted platform. On the heels of the realization, Lucius simultaneously dropped the Disillusionment spell and said, "Good morning, Madam Granger."

Startled, Hermione shrieked, one hand flying to her throat, the other snapping her wand into her hand from a quick-release sheath she wore. "Medusa's snakes!"

Unsuccessfully, Lucius attempted to suppress the grin her reaction sparked, and he said, "I had no intention of disturbing you."

"Well you did." She frowned, but recovered quickly. "Why do you assume your presence would disturb me?"

"You appeared lost in thought."

Too-intelligent brown eyes scanned the rest of the platform, its lack of population, before they returned to rest on his relative proximity. Her eyes raked him from toe to crown, resting on his jeweled tie tack before coming to rest on the pale blue eyes gazing at her. She asked, "Care to explain?"

Lucius brushed the immaculate sleeve of his robes. Deliberately to needle her, he said, "I don't believe we're on intimate enough terms."

Her eyes narrowed. "Then you leave me no choice but to speculate. Shall I?"

He said nothing, suffering her perusal, repressing an atavistic itch between the shoulder blades when she was no longer in his peripheral vision. Not that he expected a hex, but they had been enemies, and he had instigated the provocation.

"Scorpius," she said when she finished circling him, "departed for Hogwarts today. You're known to dote upon him..."she raised a finger when he snorted, "...no interruptions, please. You declined to state your business, and I'm extrapolating a theory." He held her gaze with his, noticing as he had before, that she was an excellent Occlumens. "As I said, Scorpius left today, and he might or might not have had the chance to say good-bye to you."

Beginning to enjoy himself, Lucius smiled at her. "I might have said my farewells at his home."

She shook her head. "You've only just returned from Paris."

Lucius' good humor took a Wronski Feint, plummeting to the depths of the metaphorical Quidditch pitch. "How..."

"Aside from your clothing, which is a little *haute couture* for a morning at the railway station, Astoria mentioned it when I saw her yesterday. Considering the morning's headlines, I've concluded you were here to see your grandson with as little fanfare as possible. After you bid Scorpius farewell, you sought a discreet location from which to Disapparate. Of course, you chose the least populated end of the platform..."

"Of course," he murmured.

Once more she looked between his current position and the location her family had been standing. She tilted her chin, her spine stiffening, and the lightness of her tone modulated into something harsher. "...where you couldn't resist eavesdropping on my family. I do hope we gave you a good show."

Lucius didn't notice the acid dripping from her last comment. His attention had caught a bit earlier. "The morning's headlines?"

"Your former fiancée gave Rita Skeeter an exclusive interview."

"Fuck."

His expletive wrought a sound from her, something between a snicker and a giggle. After a moment, she asked, "You didn't know?"

"As you rightly concluded, I've only just returned..." he glared at the gloat playing peek-a-boo behind her lips, "...and came straight to the station. No, Madam Granger, I didn't know." He closed his eyes hard enough to furrow his brow. He said, tightly, "You were right about my desire not to draw undue attention. Scorpius was nervous enough. I did not want to cause him -- Why am I explaining this to you?"

"Perhaps because I'm in a position to understand." They stood in silence for a moment, and then she blurted, "Lavender Brown? Really? She's not up to your usual standards."

He glared at her. "You don't hear me casting aspersions on your choice of husband."

"Ron's..."

"Ron's what?" he interrupted her. "You forget I was standing right here."

Her eyes flew wide, her cheeks flushed. "How much did you hear?"

"Enough to know you married a boor." The words *and are desperately unhappy* hung in the air between them as if Voldemort had been resurrected to sketch the fiery letters with his wand.

Hermione turned from Lucius, her shoulders rigid. "That's none of your business."

"As my choice of fiancée is none of yours."

Hermione nodded curtly. "My apologies."

"Are unnecessary." He moved so he could see her face, unconsciously looking for the smattering of scars he knew existed, yet there was no blemish to mark her smooth, porcelain skin. It was a perfectly blank mask, but Lucius knew his comment had struck as true as a Lacerating Jinx. "Loath as I am to admit it, your assessment of Miss Brown is accurate."

She glanced at him through her eyelashes. "It's equally difficult for me to make the same admission..."

"You did."

"I did what?"

"Your assessment of Miss Brown was accurate; you don't need to make the admission a second time."

Hermione hadn't been discussing Lavender Brown, and they both knew it. It did, however, take her a moment to catch on, and then she offered him a tentative smile. "All right, Mr. Malfoy. I won't."

"One of these days, I'd like you to call me Lucius," he said, and was surprised to find he meant it.

Her smile broadened. "And one of these days you'll call me Hermione."

"Fair enough."

It was then he noticed her glance at the clock beyond them, and her mouth dropped open. "I'm late."

"Far be it for me to stand in the path of Magical Law Enforcement." He stepped to the side, dramatically sweeping his arm out of her way as if gesturing her to precede him.

Hermione laughed. "Thank you, kind sir."

"It was nothing, Madam."

"Seriously, though," she said, "despite your regrettable habit of eavesdropping..."

He snorted. "One time does not a habit make. And as I recall, you were the one..."

Hermione cleared her throat and interrupted him. "As I was saying, it was nice to see you again. Mostly. And while I'm not exactly sad about the break-up of your engagement, I am sorry if it's made you unhappy."

"Not unduly." He aligned the cuff of his shirt with the sleeve of his jacket, carefully not looking at her. "It was a miscalculation, and one sooner rectified than later."

She was astute enough not to comment on any other mistakes he might have made in his life. "Well. Good-bye," Hermione said.

Spurred by the vestigial remains of good will, Lucius commented, "If you decide to do something about the albatross hanging around your neck, Carstairs will do right by you."

Hermione blinked several times, her mouth opening as if to speak, but then she nodded and spun on the ball of one foot, disappearing from sight with nary a sound to mark her departure.

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*Excerpts from a letter written to Lucius Malfoy, Esquire, the Billiard Room, Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire, England, by Scorpius Malfoy, First Year, the Library, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, near Hogsmeade, Scotland*

*Dear Grandfather,*

*You were right about Hogwarts. The castle is very big. I think it will take me weeks to find my way without having to ask a Prefect for directions. The professors are kind and the Headmistress welcomed us first years before we went into the Great Hall when we arrived. I really like the charmed roof. Do you think Mum and Dad would let me have one at home?*

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*You never told me the feast would have all my favorite things. There was bread-and-butter pudding for afters and I had seconds. Please don't tell Mum she might send me a Howler!*

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*I think Professor Longbottom will be my favorite teacher he knows so much about plants and how they work. Did you know he grows many of the ingredients for Potions*

*classes right here? It reminds me of your greenhouses at the manor.*

*Professor Slughorn is just like you told me and I don't like him much. My new friend Rose doesn't like him either and he likes her. He keeps telling her she's a lot like her mum and it makes her turn all pink.*

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*Mum and Dad probly told you I'm in Ravenclaw. I like it. I already have two friends, and Mum's pretty chuffed about it. I think Dad's a little sad. You aren't sad too I was sorted into Mum's House are you Grandfa?*

*Please write back.*

*Sincerely yours, (that's what Rose says you're supposed to write)*

*Scorpius*

*PS Will you send me one of those quills that sorts out bad spelling? Mum says I have to learn on my own, but it would make writing to you easier. Maybe it could be our little secret?*

~\*~

Despite following his romantic misadventures in the press, a thing never to be admitted, several years passed before she saw him again. It was during Easter Holidays, and Hermione had met Rose and Hugo for a late lunch and an even later dessert when they'd come to Diagon Alley with their Uncle George. There they had met some of their cousins and school friends for the day.

The majority of Rose's and Hugo's friends had already departed, except one. Hermione had never before seen Scorpius Malfoy away from his parents, or in a setting other than Hogwarts or Platform 9 ¾, and she was favorably impressed.

The foursome ate Fortescue's ice cream at one of the tables set along the alleyway while Rose described her mother's recent acquisition of a house in Cheshire. "It's closer to Hogwarts. The Floo's hooked up to the Ministry," she said, "and it has the advantage of being several counties distant from Dad's place." She rolled her cone in her fingers, tongue dragging through the ice cream to leave a swirl. "The pond will be especially nice this summer. Delilah hates it so we don't have to worry about peacock poo."

"Delilah?" Scorpius laughed, and a shaft of sunlight kissed his hair, its flaxen locks shining like galleons. "You've never told me that, Rose. Did you name the peacock Samson?"

Despite herself, Hermione was impressed Lucius' grandson would know the Muggle biblical reference.

"The first time we heard Samson cry at night," Hugo said, relating an oft-told story, "Dad was certain we were being attacked. He ran into the garden, hexes flying from his wand."

Rose giggled. "Poor Dad. He hadn't bothered with a dressing gown or slippers. He stepped right in poo and went sliding down the back slope, right into the stream at the bottom of the hill."

Scorpius grimaced, but laughed. "I'll bet he wasn't happy."

"It was lucky for Samson Mum had followed Dad downstairs, or I think we'd have eaten roast peacock for Sunday lunch!" Hugo repressed a shudder and slouched in his chair, his ice cream had already been consumed in three or four swift bites.

Rose said thoughtfully, "Dad always did hate the peacocks after that."

"Nah, Rosie, he always hated them..." Hugo corrected his sister, "...and now they're really happy at Mum's new place. There's enough room. You should see it, Scorp."

The blond replied, "I look forward to it."

Hermione smiled as Hugo launched into the story of Samson and Delilah, their first brood and two pernicious garden gnomes. In one facet of her life Hermione and her ex-mother-in-law saw eye-to-eye, Hermione had never been very harsh with garden gnomes. Her little colony would flourish but for her peacocks, whose population was considerably larger than the original brace delivered by one of Draco Malfoy's house-elves sixteen years before.

In truth, Hermione loved her country home. Muggle in origin, it had been inherited by the youngest daughter of the family, a witch, who had adapted it for her wizarding family. Regrettably, they had been killed during Voldemort's first rise. The house had passed to a distant pureblooded cousin delighted to offload it to Carstairs, Avery & Lovegood as agent for one of their clients.

It was just right for Hermione, any guests who might come for a weekend, and the children when they were home for the summer and alternate school holidays. When Hagrid had visited he'd been in raptures over the empty stables, and she had plans to turn one end of them into a guest cottage.

With a contented sigh, Hermione savored a bite of her Nasturtium Iridescence ice cream -- scintillating pieces of petal melting into golden flavor in her mouth -- reflecting how well Hugo and Rose had taken the dissolution of their parents' marriage. It was the final seal of approval Hermione hadn't needed, but appreciated.

During the final two years of Hermione's marriage, Ron's and her friends had begun to take sides. What had been a real blow to Hermione was how many of their friends sided with Ron. Of course, he had openly talked about his unhappiness, while Hermione's modus operandi was to subsume her misery in work.

If she were painfully honest with herself, Hermione would admit she hadn't the gift of easy camaraderie. Too serious, too studious and too driven for many people, but those who had remained her friends were ever-lasting. Among those few, Harry and Ginny had never taken sides; neither had Neville and Hannah Longbottom.

Many was the evening Hermione had curled up in an overstuffed armchair in front of the Longbottoms' fire, sipping a hot toddy while soaking in the rich contentment which imbued her friends' home. The night before she left Ron, Hermione had sat in that same chair and thanked her friends for their company. "You know how unhappy I've been. How unhappy Ron and I both are."

Hannah had said, "We'll always be here to listen. Not that you take advantage of it."

Hermione had smiled ruefully. "No. I'm not terribly good at accepting help when it's offered, but I can't tell you how much it's meant to me these past months ... just being here has been ... well ... it's a very clear example of what a marriage should be, and what mine is not."

"Hermione!" Neville had exclaimed while Hannah said urgently, "We never meant for you to feel like that."



"I don't." Hermione had reassured them. "You haven't done anything to make me feel that way. It's just you're wonderful together, and I don't think Ron and I have ever been wonderful together."

"Are you sure?" Neville had asked. "It seems like you've always been together."

"Considering what we all went through, it was pretty much a foregone conclusion that we'd marry," was Hermione's response. "Not that we haven't had good times, but..." She had shrugged. "It's taken me a few years to reach a decision, especially with Rose and Hugo to consider."

"Years?" Hannah had leaned forward, her expression one of earnest dismay.

Hermione had nodded. "I finally realized we aren't setting a good example for Rose or Hugo." She'd set her teacup on the table. "I'll understand if you don't feel you can support my decision."

"Hermione," Neville had said, speaking as if she were a homesick first year he'd found wandering the halls of Hogwarts castle, "you were my first friend at school on the train no less and if you think I'm going to abandon you over this ... well, I don't know what I'll do, but don't you think it!"

The evening had ended in tears all around, but Hermione had returned home with renewed confidence that her decision had been the right one.

Suddenly, Hermione realized while she'd been mentally strolling down memory lane, her ice cream was melting in sticky rivulets off the spoon and onto her fingers. She quickly wiped her hands on a serviette, bits of iridescent flower petals clinging to the white linen.

At the other side of the café table, Rose giggled at something Scorpius said.

Hermione smiled when she remembered the expression on Ron's face the first time Rose wrote a letter home: *Remember that boy, Dad? Scorpius. Well we both sorted into Ravenclaw, and he's an all right bloke.*

When Hugo had followed Rose to school the next year, he had become the third member of their triumvirate. Fortunately for them, Ron had become resigned, if not happy, about the acquaintance. For Hermione, the added bonus of the children's friendship was Astoria Malfoy.

Hermione still remembered the morning after her divorce had been announced in the *Daily Prophet*. Astoria's majestic eagle owl had entered the Ministry, evaded all attempts to dissuade it and swooped through Hermione's office doorway on level six, bearing a note of sympathy and an invitation to tea.

The following Saturday had seen Hermione at the Grange. Draco and Astoria's home was vastly different than Malfoy Manor. Its atmosphere was warm and welcoming, and Hermione had practically been bowled over by the kennel of dogs who greeted her at the Apparition point. Even Astoria's three Crups had offered Hermione pack status.

Over Turkish coffee instead of tea, an indulgence Draco didn't share with his wife but Hermione quite liked, Astoria had said, "I don't believe you can call a five-bedroom house with outbuildings and eight acres of land a little place in the country, Hermione."

"Wait until you see it, Astoria. It's quite cozy. There are two reception rooms."

"And a library?"

"Well, no, but..."

Astoria's smile had widened to a grin. "Of course, you'll make one of the reception rooms into a library."

Hermione giggled, and then blushed. What forty-year old witch giggled? Astoria's gentle laugh had warmed the room, and the two finished their afternoon in amiable discussion of the final stages of Hogwarts' Rebuilding Project.

Spooning a last bite of ice cream, Hermione idly listened to Rose, Hugo and Scorpius' plans for their summer -- Quidditch games over the pond and field at her new home and watched the passersby.

"You must come to the manor," Scorpius said. "I know my Grandfather would be delighted. He loves nothing better than a pick-up match. Rose, you'll be Seeker."

"Only if I get to be Beater," Hugo chimed in. In their love of Quidditch, Rose and Hugo were Weasley to the bone.

As if the conversation had conjured his presence, Hermione saw Lucius before he saw her. There was no mistaking his carriage, the loose white hair, breadth of shoulder, or the elegant robes. In anyone's opinion, Lucius Malfoy was a fine figure of a man.

Twenty-some years of peace had wrought many changes in the wizarding world, among those was Lucius Malfoy's ability to walk through Diagon Alley unmolested, and even by many, unrecognized as a former Death Eater.

Of the teenagers, Hugo noticed him first. "Oi, Scorp! Isn't that your Grandad?"

The blond straightened in his chair, craning his neck to see where Hugo had indicated. "It is!" he said with considerable enthusiasm. "I haven't seen him since Christmas. He's been in Brussels." Scorpius looked at Hermione. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all," she replied. Scorpius grinned, excused himself from the table and vaulted the low fence around the outdoor dining area of Fortescue's.

"Thanks, Mum," Hugo said. "Scorpius is our friend and all, but I know you don't like Mr. Malfoy."

She eyed her children. "I'm not the one who has an issue with Mr. Malfoy. It's your father and Grandad Weasley who dislike him."

"Didn't he torture you during the war?" Hugo asked.

His sister was disgusted. "Don't you know anything?"

"Rose." The tone warned her daughter, but Hermione turned toward her son. Hugo had inherited his hair and its color from her, but his was tamed by keeping it two-inches short. Otherwise, when people saw him with Ron, it was obvious they were father and son. And yet, Hermione never saw her ex-husband when she looked at Hugo; she only saw her child. "Mr. Malfoy did not torture me."

"But Dad said..."

She looked him straight in the eyes. "Your father wasn't there."

"How could he rescue you if he wasn't there?"

Hermione glanced down the alley to where Scorpius greeted Lucius. Despite the lack of physical demonstration, it was obvious to anyone with eyes that grandson and grandfather were fond of one another. "As they will be joining us shortly," Hermione said, "I will be brief, and I expect you to listen and treat him with the respect you give all your friends' families."

"Bellatrix Lestrange tortured me in front of the Malfoys, but they were not in a position to object. Remember that, son. They were victims of their own mistaken prejudices and essentially prisoners in their own home.

"The war is thankfully over, and I have met Mr. Malfoy a number of times since then. Not only has he been perfectly cordial, he's been helpful."

Hugo frowned. "All right, he's reformed if you say so. But still. Dad said you were unconscious when he and Uncle Harry got to you, so how do you know Malfoy didn't--"

Rose interrupted her brother by waving her ice cream spoon in his face. He pushed her hand aside, and a chunk of dark chocolate *splatted* to the marble tabletop, where it lay melting and ignored by the small family. "I told you to ask Mum about this last year."

"Last year?" Hermione asked, her brow furrowing in concentration. "Before or after the divorce was final?"

Rose rolled her eyes and answered her mother's question. "You know how Dad is, Mum. He was talking about 'the war years' while chatting up Abigail Smith."

In spite of Ron's eagerness to bolster his standing in his children's eyes, Hermione had always stressed the fact their exploits were a result of necessity and survival, not glory or fame.

Hugo nodded in agreement with his sister, and said, "Her brother brought her to dinner when he and his wife were over. I didn't like Mr. Smith at all."

"Zachariah Smith had dinner at the cottage?" Hermione's eyebrows rose in shock.

"He was working on a case with Dad and Uncle Harry," Rose explained.

"And he talked about *my* being tortured?"

"No," Hugo said, and it was clear from his expression that his father had suddenly developed feet of clay. "Dad brought it up. Rosie's right. He was .... I thought ...." He pursed his lips, and then said, "Dad made it seem as if Mr. Malfoy really enjoyed hurting you."

"It's simply not true," Hermione responded gently. "In fact, Mr. Malfoy couldn't have "

"Why?" Hugo asked.

Before she could reply, an urbane male voice provided the answer. "Because, Mr. Weasley, I had been stripped of my wand for the better part of a year."

Hugo leapt to his feet, flushing a deep and unbecoming red as he faced the speaker. Rose mouthed, 'I'm sorry,' to Scorpius, who stood behind his grandfather, cheeks a ruddy hue and his lips thinned in anger. Torn between wanting to mitigate her son's *faux pas* and her own rampant curiosity to see how Lucius would handle the situation, Hermione remained silent and watchful. She relaxed when Hugo offered his hand to the older wizard.

"Please accept my apology, Mr. Malfoy. I was merely..."

"Being understandably protective of your mother." Lucius accepted the hand and the apology. He then nodded cordially to Rose. "Miss Weasley."

"It's nice to see you, Mr. Malfoy," she said.

Scorpius resumed his seat at the table next to Hugo's empty chair, elbowing his red-headed friend on the way down. The adults pretended they didn't see the byplay, and Lucius spoke to Hermione. "It's evident where your son inherited his honor."

Hermione's cheeks flushed with pleasure. "I'd like to think it was all his own, but thank you for the compliment just the same. Won't you join us?"

"It would be my pleasure."

Before he could summon an empty seat from a nearby table, Hugo took the three steps necessary and moved the chair for Lucius. Giving the older man a hard stare, he said, "I learned more than honor from my mother, Sir."

Hermione's chastising, "Hugo!" was ignored by her son and the recipient of his challenge. Rose placed one hand on Scorpius' arm, restraining him from physically launching at his friend.

Lucius' mouth pruned in thought, one eyebrow arched at Hugo, who at fifteen was nevertheless as tall as the older wizard. "I don't believe my grandson has mentioned your House, Mr. Weasley? I assumed you were a Gryffindor...."

Hugo tilted his chin. "Hufflepuff. The first Weasley in four generations actually."

Lucius sat in the chair Hugo provided and said blandly, "My mother was a Hufflepuff. It was commonly acknowledged amongst the family that my father was firmly under her thumb."

Hugo grinned. "Save us from Slytherin cunning, brash Gryffindor, Ravenclaw's cutting observation, and the resolve of the Hufflepuffs!"

Lucius chuckled. "Quite. Now if you will be good enough to fetch my ice cream, I believe I will consider you the most remarkable young man of Scorpius' acquaintance."

"But, Grandfa," Scorpius exclaimed, "you said you already ate."

"Now we have proof manners aren't hereditary." Lucius smiled tightly, and Scorpius looked abashed. "As I have just left Carstairs at the Camelot Club, Scorpius, I can assure you I have already dined. However, ice cream isn't food. It's manna from heaven."

There was general laughter at the table, and then Scorpius joined Hugo on his quest for penance. After a moment, Rose said, "If they're left to themselves, they'll order you the Crystal Cave, Mr. Malfoy, and I don't think all of us together could finish it." She rose to her feet and strode after her brother and friend.

For a moment, Lucius and Hermione basked in the unusually fine afternoon. Then he said, "Had I known we would be meeting, I would have more than my own respects to pay. Carstairs thinks quite highly of you."

Hermione smiled. "The sentiment is mutual, I assure you. After all, I have him to thank for my present state."

"Indeed?" Lucius leaned forward slightly. "What state would that be?"

"The possession of a new house that suits me perfectly."

"Ah, yes. The Cheshire place. It has a pretty prospect." Hermione's eyes widened, and he answered her unasked question. "I considered it when Draco and Astoria married."

"Oh?"

"After due consideration, it was too far from Wiltshire."

Hermione understood perfectly, but she only said, "The Grange suits them well. It's a beautiful home."

"Indeed. Astoria is a gracious hostess and has exquisite taste,"

Hermione grinned. "You would think so. She chose Draco."

Lucius smirked, and then Scorpius returned to the table, an obscenely abundant mountain of ice cream in a sparkling crystal dish floated behind him, magically directed by one of Fortescue's enchanted spoons. With a flourish, the dish settled lightly to the table. Scorpius said, over his shoulder to Rose, "If it's manna from heaven he wants, then it's manna from heaven he gets."

Hugo arrived then, handing out other spoons and serviettes all around.

Genially, Lucius commented, "The most remarkable young man of Scorpius' acquaintance," before he took his first bite of Lemon Fizz. Small bubbles floated off the surface of the pale yellow ice cream to burst in a rainbow of color. The group dug into the dessert, chatting amiably, and Hermione smiled more than she had ever expected in Lucius Malfoy's company.

In the end, Rose was right. The five couldn't finish the Crystal Cave, but they certainly made a valiant effort. As the sun sank into the west, the clock in Gringotts' tower tolled the hour and Scorpius wiped his mouth. "I have to go. I'm to meet my father at Flourish and Blotts."

"I'll accompany you," Lucius said, wiping his own mouth fastidiously before rising to his feet and becoming the forbidding pureblooded figure with whom Hermione was familiar. He had donned the persona as one would a cloak against inclement weather, and she wondered if it was how he approached all his public appearances. "Thank you for your company," she said.

"I enjoyed it," he replied, apparently as surprised as she at that fact.

"We'll walk with you, Scorp," Hugo said. "Rose and I have to be at Three Dub in half an hour to Floo home."

Lucius' gaze rested on Hermione. "And you, Madam?"

"I'm afraid it's back to the Ministry for me." They filed through the low gate leading to the alley proper, and turned toward the bookstore. "It has been a wonderful afternoon though."

"Indeed."

"I'll walk with you as far as the bookstore."

Rose sauntered down the alley, behind Scorpius and Hugo and just ahead of where Hermione strolled with Lucius. "You've been really busy, Mum. Even if we were staying with you for the hols, this would probably be the only time we'd see you."

"It's not that bad, Rose," her mother chided.

"Close though," Hugo called back over his shoulder, siding with his sister. "But it's okay, Mum. You've got us for half the summer. And now that you've left that rubbish flat, we can practice our game."

Hermione sighed dramatically. "You only love me for my Quidditch field."

"Oh, that's it," Hugo laughed. "Never mind the fact you gave birth to us."

Rose hung back, looping her arm through her mother's. "You really don't mind that we're with Dad for the hols, do you?"

"You were with me for most of Christmas, and he's your Dad. Whatever else he may be, he loves you both dearly."

"Thanks, Mum." Rose squeezed Hermione's arm before catching up to the boys.

Hermione slowed, and Lucius, being a gentleman in many things, matched his pace with hers. She glanced at the teens, ascertaining they were enmeshed in a conversation and then glanced at her companion. He was already looking at her. "Yes?" he asked.

"I wanted to thank you." His surprise was evident, and she continued, "I know it was some time before I followed your advice, but when I was ready, Mr. Carstairs did 'take care of me'."

Lucius inclined his head.

"You were right." Hermione paused, turning toward him fully. "I was desperately unhappy, and when you pointed it out, I knew I would have to face up to it."

"For what it's worth, I am ... happy ... for you." He grimaced as he said *happy*, and Hermione laughed gaily. "Oh, my sweet Merlin!" she exclaimed, "You look utterly ... oh, dear. I shouldn't tease you, but that look..." When he frowned she laughed harder.

"Madam--"

"Don't backtrack now," she said. "I'm sorry I laughed at you, but friends ...." She trailed off, and then said stiffly, "I beg your pardon." Hermione quickened her pace to catch up with her children, her cheeks flaming with embarrassment. She had teased him once at the Hogsmeade cemetery, and that memory, coupled with the playfulness of their afternoon, had let Hermione forget for a few minutes who he was, who she was, and the fact they'd been mortal enemies thirty years before.

She heard him lengthen his stride, but she reached Hugo and Scorpius before Lucius reached her, and she wouldn't look at him. The good-byes were affectionate between Rose, Hugo and Scorpius, plans for their return to school in mid-spate. None of the three noticed the change in Hermione's manner, nor Lucius' unsuccessful attempts to catch her eye.

She chivvied Rose and Hugo to the joke shop so they wouldn't be late. Just before they reached number ninety-three, Hugo said, "Mr. Malfoy wasn't what I expected."

"Oh?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah. I thought he'd be like Nott's father, sneering and making faces as if we stink up the air."

"Scorpius told you his grandfather wasn't like that," Rose said in exasperation.

"Yeah." Hugo paused outside the Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes, and turned toward his sister. "Maybe now he's not, but he was once."

"Maybe he's grown up." Rose wrinkled her nose as she spoke, and then she giggled. Hugo laughed and opened the door to his uncle's shop. Hermione tried to smile, but their comments had given her something to consider.

~oOo~

*Excerpts from a letter written to Hermione Granger, the Breakfast Room, Grove House, Holmes' Chapel, Cheshire by Lucius Malfoy, the Library, Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire, England*

*Madam Granger,*

*My daughter-in-law assures me Apollo will find you in Cheshire rather than at the Ministry, and I know Astoria to be a woman of remarkable perceptiveness.*

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*I trust you and your children are well, and that you have enjoyed more time with them during the remainder of their holidays.*

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*I request your indulgence and rely upon your sense of fair play in reading my missive. When last we met my regrettable response, or lack thereof, to your friendly raillery was not, as you so obviously concluded, a matter of distaste. The past twenty-five years has seen me imprisoned, vilified, impugned, and scorned. I have many acquaintances but few friends. That you, who have more reason than many, should be so cordial astonished me.*

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*If you would allow me to show my remorse, I would be honored if you would dine with me Saturday next at a venue of your choosing.*

*In closing, I remain respectfully yours,*

*Lucius Abraxas Malfoy*

~o0o~

## Three

*Chapter 3 of 3*

For some, a paradigm shift takes a fraction of a second. For Lucius Malfoy, that fraction of a second is three decades in the making.

**Title: The White Peacock**

**Author: Bambu**

~o0o~

When next he saw her she was cloaked against the evening's chill, residual vapor from the last departing engine giving her a backdrop of gothic portent, but her expression was open, possibly welcoming, and Platform 9 ¾ was deserted save for their presence.

Lucius had dressed with great care, having sent an owl to Henry Cromwell inquiring about Muggle customs and evening attire. There had been a discomfiting moment when Lucius stared at the suit his personal house-elf, Chevalier, laid out for his inspection. It had taken fully two minutes for him to realize his most recent acquisition from Monsieur LaPierre at Abbott's, clothiers to wizards with discriminating taste, conformed to that of Muggle *haute couture*. Initial outrage at being duped had settled into satisfaction and a smirk. Lucius would be decently appareled for dining, and his guest would have no flaw to sneer at. *Not that she would*, he had thought. *Hermione Granger may be many things. Petty isn't on the list.*

"This is less frequented..." she greeted him with a smile, gesturing to the empty platform, "...and has the benefit of being a location we both know well."

"Will you tell me now where we're going?" Lucius asked. "Something more definitive than 'it's in Muggle London,' or 'dinner attire is appropriate'?"

In the dark it was difficult to see her blush, but the added color enhanced her features. Hermione Granger had grown into herself, he thought. The authority of her office became her, and she radiated a powerful aura. Lucius thought it was more appealing than any perfume he'd bought for Narcissa over the course of their marriage, or any woman he had dated since.

There was no coquetry in Hermione's demeanor as she spoke. She needed none. "Our reservations are for The Landau in Marylebone near Regent's Park. Kingsley said the food is excellent."

Lucius brow arched. "Kingsley Shacklebolt suggested the place we're dining?"

"Not specifically. I asked him for a restaurant with a luxurious ambiance and an excellent menu. He doesn't know it's you I'm having dinner with." Hermione stepped closer to him and peered into his eyes she was several inches shorter than he, and tendrils of her curly hair framed her face. "This isn't an attempt to punish you by suggesting

Muggle London. I thought you would prefer discretion."

"I prefer discretion in many things," Lucius commented, "especially a first time."

"Or a last." Lucius chuckled at her tart rejoinder, and then she said, "I hope you don't mind if I Side-Along you? There's a public Apparition point in the All Soul's Church portico, and it's a short walk from there."

By way of an answer, Lucius offered her his arm.

Hermione looked at it for a moment before tucking her hand in the bend of his elbow. Her eyes were sparkling as she aligned her foot with his, and he allowed her to pull him into the black constriction that was Apparition. Within seconds, they appeared in a small room carved magically into the stone of All Soul's. When they entered the church's portico Lucius scrutinized the columns supporting its roof. He sneered. "The architect was clearly an amateur."

"Really?" Hermione followed his glance. "How can you tell?"

"Before the Statute of Secrecy was enacted, building styles were similar between Muggle and wizarding worlds. My father was interested in architecture, and when I was a child, I used to read his books on the subject."

"Your father?" she asked, clearly surprised.

"Don't interrupt the lecture," Lucius said in a mock serious tone.

In an equally light vein, Hermione replied, "A life-long swot never interrupts a lecture."

Lucius heard more than she meant to reveal in her comment, but he pretended not to have noticed. Obliging, he pointed toward the columns with his cane. "The capital is Ionic in style while the columns are Corinthian. Corinthian columns are more slender than Ionic, and the capital to column ratio differs between the two. Thus, when viewed at a distance, this poorly matched example will give the impression of too much weight on an inadequate, even spindly, support system."

He glanced around, out onto Langham Place where Muggle vehicles sped past. "We should have to step into that to get the full effect, but I assure you it will be so."

Hermione subtly guided their direction toward the crosswalk which would take them to the Langham Hotel, "Since our restaurant is there..." she pointed to the imposing structure on the opposite side of the street, "...we can take a look."

"That is a *restaurant*?"

She smiled at him. "I had exactly the same reaction when I first saw it."

Considering her comment about Shackbolt's recommending the restaurant, Lucius asked, "And when exactly was that?"

"Earlier today when I confirmed the Apparition point was still viable. The building's a hotel; the restaurant is inside. There's a private entrance, just there on the curve."

They crossed the busy street, Lucius looking askance at the flow of traffic, and he winced as horns honked. "Horrid noise. However do they allow it?"

"It's transportation. Much quicker than thestral-drawn carriages," she replied. "Here we are."

Briefly, Lucius turned to look at the All Soul's tower. "See." Satisfaction laced his tone. "Spindly."

Hermione glanced over her shoulder and nodded. "I've never liked the portico."

"Evidence of your discerning eye," he replied. Then, with a dismissive shrug, Lucius turned his back on the defective church.

They left their outer wear with a young woman dressed in severe black, and Lucius missed the admiring look on Hermione's face when she took in his suit and him in it. He was too busy controlling his breath. "You are magnificent, Hermione."

"Thank you." Her blush, which had earlier faded, blossomed on her cheeks until it matched the color of the dress she wore, the same shade as his favorite Bordeaux. Eschewing the current trend of showing too much skin, Hermione had chosen to dress in a style which suited her. High-necked and long-sleeved, the dress hung to a demure length, showing her figure to great advantage. Known to be a connoisseur of the fairer sex, Lucius decided Hermione Granger was a woman to be savored.

He cleared his throat against an entirely visceral reaction, and gestured for her to precede him to their table. He smirked; watching Hermione's hips sway beneath her subtle but elegant dress was well worth the exercise in good manners.

They were led past a glass-fronted wall of cabinets housing what appeared to be an impressive selection of wines, and Lucius paused, raising his hand to the glass, noting it was chilled to the touch. *Temperature controlled*, he thought. *Clever*. He the ease of access and clean presentation of the showcases, not to mention the potential mitigation of Cooling Charm damage which was a detriment to wizarding vintners.

Lucius covertly eyed his surroundings. Aside from the glare of the lighting fixtures and the presence of a Muggle wait-staff rather than seldom seen or heard house-elves, Lucius could have been in any upscale restaurant in the wizarding world.

The maitre d' placed menus on the table before departing silently. As Lucius perused the menu, he noted the first sign of anxiousness in Hermione's demeanor.

"It is not what I expected," he said, his tone unremarkable.

"I know you weren't expecting some chippy down the waterfront, but where exactly did you think we were going?"

"A chippy?" he asked, ignoring the substance of her query. "What in Merlin's name is a chippy?"

A mischievous glint lit her brown eyes, and she grinned. "I'll take you to one sometime." She glanced around and appeared to wave her hand at their surroundings, but Lucius saw the tip of her wand peeking out of her sleeve at the wrist, and he felt the distinctive tingle of a spell Severus Snape had created years before. Hermione didn't acknowledge that she'd just performed magic in a Muggle establishment, and he filed the information away for later reflection. She said, "You'll think you're slumming or more probably, the area will confirm your opinion of Muggles, but there's this place Tyneside, Colman's, which has the best fish and chips I've ever eaten."

"I'll pretend you didn't just accuse me of aristocratic arrogance or ignorance. My cook makes excellent fish and chips. If this restaurant lives up to Shackbolt's recommendation, then I might be brave enough to attempt another foray into the Muggle world."

"I don't think bravery is a prerequisite," she said, and he basked in the light of her smile, "and an accusation wasn't my intent. I was merely commenting on your notably refined palette."

"I assure you," he said, "some of the best food I've eaten has come in mundane packages and surroundings. The hag selling chestnuts at the corner of "

He broke off as the waiter approached and Hermione cancelled the Muffliato. A moment later, the sommelier arrived to discuss wines with Lucius. Hermione admitted she knew little about wine beyond what she liked, and appeared perfectly content to let him exercise his knowledge about viticulture and sunny slopes.

If nothing more, Lucius considered the evening a success because he might have discovered a new market for the family winery. Malfoy Vineyards had suffered an economic downturn after the war, but exporting to a Muggle market might bear further consideration, especially if those temperature controlled cabinets were adaptable.

While awaiting their starters, Lucius and Hermione discussed favorite foods. Lucius agreed that cream tea was better in Cornwall than anywhere else, and then he asked, "What do you think of the chardonnay?"

"It's excellent." Hermione sipped her wine before commenting further. "Such a light wine. Should I smell butter?"

He swirled the wine in his glass and inhaled. "Butter isn't an unusual fragrance in a chardonnay, and I also detect a subtle hint of apple." He then took a drink. "It has an appealing finish."

Hermione nodded. "It's perfect with my soufflé; it doesn't overwhelm the flavors at all. How is it with your terrine?"

"It's perhaps a little light for the duck, but the red we'll have with our main course will marry better."

"Do you think so? I would have served white with the main course as well."

"The old rules are simply guidelines." He spread some terrine on a slice of toasted brioche and topped it with a dab of chutney. He looked at her eager expression. He liked the way she listened to him. "If the sommelier is correct, then the earthiness and subtle berry notes of the red should bolster the flavor of your risotto and smooth out any bitterness from the damsons accompanying my grouse."

Hermione grinned. "If you were ever looking for an occupation, Lucius " for he had become Lucius and she Hermione over the course of the evening, "...you could become a food and wine critic for the *Prophet*. That paper could use a more elevated tone."

"Why do you assume managing what little estate has been left to me isn't an occupation?" he asked with some asperity.

Fortunately, they were interrupted by the arrival of their main courses, and Hermione frowned as she eyed Lucius' plate. "Will that be enough?" she asked when the servers departed.

"More than adequate, I assure you." Lucius raised his glass, offering a toast. "To the sky and earth, may our ambitions reach as high as one while our feet remain firmly planted in the other."

By the time he'd finished his grouse, Lucius realized he was having an excellent time. When Hermione laughed at his joke about the barrister and the Wizengamot, he knew he would work to hear that sound again. *A number of my ancestors are turning in their graves*, he thought.

Delicately patting her lips with her serviette, Hermione said, "About your earlier comment...."

He raised a brow in silent query.

"About your having an occupation. I didn't intended to imply you were indolent or a wastrel. I know you aren't. After all, Samson's virility is renowned in my neighborhood, and I've been offered a variety of inducements for his services."

"Good god, woman!" Lucius exclaimed. "You haven't been breeding him indiscriminately--" he broke off at the expression on her face, realized immediately how his comment could be misconstrued, and said, "I've spent the past decade husbanding the Malfoy breeding stock."

Understanding dawned on her face, and Lucius was surprisingly relieved.

"You've no reason to be concerned on my account," she said. "Your only true competition might be Carstairs, but I turned down his offer for Delilah."

"Delilah?" he asked in exactly the same tone his grandson had used during Easter holidays, and then Lucius chuckled. "I should have guessed the name when you said Samson was the peacock. Oh, how the mighty have fallen."

Hermione grinned, then said, "You know, I've never properly thanked you for the gift."

"I have your note to Draco. I was pleased you kept them."

"I never knew birds could show affection, but Delilah is terribly sweet. She didn't like Ron at all."

"They're quite intelligent," Lucius replied blandly, and when she laughed aloud, he joined her.

While they indulged their amusement, their plates were removed and their waiter stood at Lucius' elbow until he deigned to acknowledge him. "Ah, yes," Lucius remarked after a moment, "dessert. Hermione?"

"No thank you. I don't really indulge in sweets."

Lucius raised a finger. "Ice cream?"

She smiled. "I should've said I only indulge in manna from heaven."

Lucius chuckled. "No one can turn down manna from heaven. However," he said, while perusing the menu, "instead of something sweet, what about cheese."

"Maybe." Hermione leaned to look at the menu in his hands. Her face was so close Lucius could see past her glamour to the slight dent in her eyelid, where she bore the scar gained in his home. He cleared his throat.

"If I may...."

"Yes?" Lucius' stare was intimidating enough the waiter stepped back, but having had the effrontery to interrupt in the first place he took his chance and said, "I recommend the Crozier blue with saffron honey."

Hermione laid her hand on Lucius' arm, and spoke to the waiter. "I think I'd like to try that. Lucius, will you try it as well?"

"Yes," he answered, his tone brusque, but he stared at her hand, and allowed himself to be mollified while the waiter escaped unhexed. "I am unaccustomed to "

She interrupted. "I know you are. I appreciate how open-minded you've been tonight. "

Sensing a hint of uncertainty in her manner, Lucius said, "I have thoroughly enjoyed myself, and Shacklebolt's reputation has escaped untarnished. The food has been excellent, the ambiance elegant, and the company ... incomparable." He leaned toward her, enticed by her heightened color, and he indulged himself by tucking an escaped strand of hair back into her coiffure.

Her eyes widened. "Are you flirting with me?"

"I believe I am. Are you offended?"

"I probably should be, but you do it so well."

He knew his smile was smug, but he thought it justified. "I do many things well, Hermione."

She leaned forward to brush his lips ever-so-lightly with hers. "That doesn't surprise me at all." And then she leaned back, having timed her kiss to take him by surprise just as their cheese and port were served.

Regrettably, at that moment, her wand vibrated and Hermione jolted upright in her seat. Lucius watched her spine stiffen and her professional demeanor slip into place as if a suit of armor had suddenly encased her body. "Please excuse me," she said. "They don't bother me unless it's an emergency."

"I understand." He hid his disappointment. Petulance would terminate whatever attraction was building between them.

Hermione rose from her seat, saying, "I'll return shortly. I have to find somewhere private to send and receive a message."

As if Summoned, the waiter was at Hermione's elbow. "May I be of service, Madam?"

"Yes," she replied, unaware of the waiter's openly admiring glance and flirtatious manner. "I need somewhere to reply to a "

Lucius gritted his teeth. If not his life or masculinity, the man's gratuity had been significantly compromised.

"You were paged?" the waiter asked. "Right this way, Madam. We have a secure room available for such contingencies."

As Hermione departed, she turned her head and smiled ruefully at her dinner companion, but then she was gone.

Lucius narrowed his eyes and sipped his port, suddenly furious. While he had followed no agenda, except the one his subconscious and libido agreed upon, he was sulking like a spoilt child whose new toy had been taken from him. A toy he hadn't realized he favored.

He frowned.

Hermione was no toy. She was, however, an alluring, vibrant, interesting woman he was growing to like despite their history, her upbringing and his previously entrenched dislike. He pondered his attraction to her while beckoning the waiter and paying with the rectangular gold card Cromwell had assured him would suffice. When Hermione returned, cutting a path through the tables in the main room, Lucius knew the evening had reached an end.

"Please forgive me," she said without preamble. "I have to be in the Minister's office as soon as feasibly possible."

"As disappointed as that makes me, I respect the exigencies of your position."

She smiled, and it carried so much relief, Lucius knew the source of at least one of the frictions in her former marriage. "Thank you for that," she said, looking around for the waiter.

Lucius rose to his feet and retrieved his cane. "I anticipated the outcome of your conversation. We may depart as soon as you like."

"How thoughtful of you. Thank you."

Lucius followed her from the alcove, and smirked when he noticed the number of men giving Hermione appreciative looks. Pausing to collect their outer garments, Lucius draped Hermione's cloak over her shoulders, and he could feel the tension radiating from her rigid posture. Whatever reason she had been called to the Minister's office, it wasn't the result of a whim.

Crossing the street, Hermione glanced up at the All Soul's tower and remarked, "You were so right. Spindly is exactly how it appears." And when they reached the small and dusty room, Hermione faced Lucius. "I'll be honest with you."

"By all means." He braced himself; she was, after all, a straightforward sort of woman.

She narrowed her eyes at his bland response. "Despite some misgivings, I had a wonderful time."

"We are of one mind on this point," he replied, and leaned toward her, but Hermione was quick to press her fingers to his lips. "I really must go," she said, "and if you kiss me, Lucius, it will be neither quick nor appropriate in a public setting."

Rather than being offended, he chuckled. "Indeed, I hadn't planned to tease you." He didn't say, *as you did me in the restaurant* but they both heard the words nonetheless.

Her fingers moved from his mouth until her hand cupped his smooth-shaven face. "Next time, I'll take *you* for fish and chips."

"I shall look forward to it. Godspeed, Hermione."

He watched her disappear in a whirl of red skirt and black cloak, and took himself to his manor, his library, and a very good cognac. He had a paradigm shift to reconcile.

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*Excerpts from a letter written to Rose Weasley, Ravenclaw, and Hugo Weasley, Hufflepuff, the Great Hall, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, near Hogsmeade, Scotland by Hermione Granger, the garden, Grove House, Holmes' Chapel, Cheshire, England*

*Dearest Rose and Hugo,*

*I write this letter to you both as its contents matter to you both. I know there have been rumors in the **Daily Prophet** about my growing friendship with your friend Scorpius' grandfather.*

*In this case, the rumors have some basis in fact, although not those about the Imperius Curse. As if I couldn't throw one off by the time I was twenty! The truth is, I have been seeing Lucius, and not in any professional capacity, although I did consult with him on the recent Nott murder investigation.*

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*I have already informed your father, so you needn't be wary on that score. Yes, Hugo, his reaction was as volatile as you might expect, and Rose, I handled it as well as you would have advised me. Your father will need some sympathy, although I'm sure his newest lady love what was her name? will be there to offer appropriate comfort, not to mention the counter-charm he'll undoubtedly need in the next day or so. And no, you may not share knowledge of that particular jinx with your Uncle George.*

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*It's entirely possible my news isn't a surprise, and Scorpius has already told you of my dating his grandfather. If he hasn't, please do not blame him, as Lucius asked him keep quiet until I was ready for the news to go public. For a number of reasons we've kept a low profile, some of which you can imagine, but mostly it was because I wanted to tell you in person, and I wanted to wait until your NEWTs were over, Rose. However, events have conspired against my convenience, and forgive me for sending you an owl rather than waiting or coming to Scotland in person.*  
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*We didn't anticipate seeing Scorpius last weekend. Draco's illness was as unexpected as it was serious. I was very glad Scorpius could be at his father's bedside while he underwent this treatment. It would be unfair of you to hold your friend accountable when he's been so worried about his father.*  
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*In case you should wonder, I am, against all the odds, very happy. Lucius is considerate, abrasive, interesting, and above all, he listens to me when I talk about things which bore others to tears. I suspect it's this latter quality which I find so endearing, and refreshing.*

*And because I know this remains a sensitive issue, Hugo, Lucius and I have agreed to disagree about house-elves, although he assures me his are paid and treated very well. He's invited me to interview them at my leisure.*  
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*Do not worry, my loves. He is much the same man you met in Diagon Alley several months ago, and, please ignore reports to the contrary. Do not like him for my sake, like him for his own. I assure you he is well worth knowing.*  
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*I'll see you the first week of July, and Scorpius will come to Grove House as well. Draco will need several additional weeks of recuperation before he is fully recovered. Lucius promises to play Keeper for your pick-up Quidditch matches, only if I promise to admire you all from the sidelines.*  
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*Don't revise too much, and as ever, I send you all my love,*

*Mummy*

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He had seen her many times over the ensuing months, in moods ranging from crisply professional to teary-eyed distress to incandescent fury, and yet, the next time he saw her she was asleep. Hermione's hair fanned across the plump white pillows of her bed, several strands of grey twining themselves amongst the vibrant titian shades Lucius had first noticed on her visit to Azkaban twenty years before. He stared at her sleeping face, graced by morning light pouring through sheers guarding her windows from the outside world.

He visually charted the small constellation of scars on her face, resisting the urge to kiss the one dimpling her lower lip. She no longer concealed them when they were alone, and Lucius relished her show of trust. That he was there, in her bed, in her home, willingly, nay, eagerly sharing what free time she had was a wellspring of delight to him.

He wrapped a curl around his finger, and gently brought it to his lips for a caress, his eyes traveling around the surprisingly feminine room, which was nonetheless welcoming. The flowers standing in front of the fireplace were in magical stasis, their beauty never fading in the perennially fresh room. Although.... Lucius reached for his wand, set atop a nightstand, and without awakening his partner, he lazily charmed the pink gerberas. Yellow was a more appropriate accent to the pale lavender walls.

Hermione sighed in her sleep, and Lucius capitulated to his desire, bending his head to gently kiss the scar on her neck. She reached for him, a smile tugging her lips from their repose. "Mmmmmmmmm, Lucius."

Considering that invitation enough, he rolled onto his back, pulling her with him. "Good morning, goddess," he murmured.

Her eyelashes fluttered and her smile brightened when she opened her eyes. "Much better than a dream."

Tangling his hands in her hair, Lucius angled her head for a good morning kiss, but she balked. "One minute, love." She grazed his lips with hers before slipping from the bed as he growled in protest.

Of course, it was only a half-hearted protest at her odd quirk of brushing her teeth immediately upon waking. The first time she had left his bed to do so, he had commented that a cleansing charm was faster, but Hermione claimed it left her teeth feeling filmy. Reminded, however, of her errand, Lucius swished and flicked his own



mouth clean before dropping his wand back on the bedside table.

After several months -- although Hermione would say it had taken three decades -- Lucius had finally been invited to stay the night. He would be damned to eternity with the Dark Lord before he would jeopardize what he had gained in befriending and bedding Hermione Granger.

He stretched lazily and allowed himself a smug grin.

"Yes, yes, yes, you're a prime specimen of male virility," Hermione drawled from the door to her *suite* lavatory. She wore nothing but a smile, and the morning chill puckered her nipples; Lucius watched her breasts sway enticingly as she crossed the room, a lascivious grin on her face.

Her enthusiasm for sex, specifically, for having sex with him, was as invigorating as the debates they entered about abstruse codes of law and wizarding culture. Sometimes Lucius wound her up just for the fun of seeing her passionate defense of whatever point she had been making.

"My dear, I was thinking no such thing," he said with feigned humility. "My expression of delight was provoked entirely by your charming company."

She narrowed her eyes, but willingly took his outstretched hand, and he reeled her in. Then, when she had drawn close, she reached out and tweaked his nipple. "Damn me!" he exclaimed, and Hermione's ring of laughter was like the peal of a church bell.

She slid onto the bed, under the duvet and into his arms. Her nose was cold against his neck, and he shivered, aroused and chilled simultaneously. When she kissed him, her minty taste was something he had grown used to.

He heart raced and he bucked his hips, his erection rubbing against the cotton of her sheet. Hermione was so direct in the taking and giving of pleasure, he knew she wouldn't keep him waiting long.

However, he was unprepared to feel restraints snake out from the wrought iron corners of her bedstead and wrap around his wrists and ankles. His tongue was busy, and he didn't protest, although he tested the strength of the restraints while she enthusiastically kissed him. When she broke the kiss, Hermione arched her back, bracing her weight on her hands, angled above him. Her tumultuous hair cascaded around his face, and lay atop his platinum locks.

She looked directly into his eyes and asked, "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Really?"

"Yes, Hermione. I trust you."

She kissed him again, softer, less demanding, but then she crawled off him, fondling his erection in passing. He hissed encouragement for her to take further liberties.

"I've been reading," she said.

When he smirked, she tweaked his nipple again. Lucius protested.

"I'd believe that protest, Lucius, if your cock hadn't just surged against my hip." The white duvet bunched in a cumulus effect beneath her as she settled onto her knees beside him. Surveying his nude form, Hermione glided the fingers of one hand across his skin from the pale hairs on his calves, up over his kneecap, fingering a scar from a slicing hex on his left thigh, and then idly following the treasure trail in reverse until she grazed his pectorals and throat before placing a single fingertip on his lips.

Anticipation simmered in Lucius' veins.

"I want to try something I think you'll like," she said while leaning forward, across to her nightstand. Hermione grabbed her wand, and with a flick and a jab, the restraints tightened their hold, pulling his limbs taut. And they continued to tighten in an apparent attempt to lift him off the mattress. Before his confinement was actually painful, the first charm taught at Hogwarts activated, and Lucius' body became weightless, elevating him above the mattress.

He had been straining to hold his head up, and as Hermione's non-verbal *Wingardium Leviosa* engaged, Lucius relaxed into its hold, trusting her magic as he trusted his own.

"You are a very attentive lover," she said.

"This is bad?" he asked, and heard the sounds of liquid being poured.

"Not at all. But I want to *explore* you. To know your body as well as you know mine." Before Lucius could ask, he felt her hands on him, massaging the soles of his feet, his toes, his Achilles' tendons. Her hands were slick with some lubricating potion. It had stimulating effects too, he realized, as lust raced through his nerve endings from sensitive arch to groin to lungs and brain. Had someone asked whether the lubricant was magical or mundane his answer would have been that it didn't matter; it felt bloody marvelous.

As Hermione worked her way around Lucius' body, he tingled with unanswered need. His untouched erection bobbed for attention, as eager as the fifteen-year-old Lucius had once been.

When Hermione kissed him next, his tongue speared into her mouth, mimicking what he wanted to do with other body parts. She sucked his tongue greedily, panting with excitement when she pulled back. "You are so fucking sexy, Lucius. I want you in every possible way."

His voice dropped to a lower register when he spoke, not unaffected by her praise. "You shall have me, Hermione, but do you know what to do with me?"

She leaned forward to suckle one of his flat male nipples, flicking the little nub with her tongue, and when she sat back on her haunches, she grinned. "I certainly hope so. Have you ever had your prostate massaged?"

He furrowed his brow. "Not that I recall."

"Then you haven't," she replied, and picked up a small blue vial, pouring a viscous liquid onto her fingers. "You would remember, I assure you."

"And you would know this from your vast experience?" It was one of his sources of pride, the fact he was only the second man who had been in her bed. He knew she would be spoiled for any other after what they had already experienced together; not that he planned to let her go any time in the foreseeable future.

Her hands kneaded his butt cheeks, and then fingers dipped between them, pressing against the asterisk of his anus. Lucius went rigid. No one had ever been so familiar before. "Your prostate," Hermione said, as she wrapped the fingers of her left hand around his rigid, full-masted cock, "is inside you. It is vital to ejaculation."

Lucius' breath came in short, sharp gasps as she stroked him, and then he felt her fingertip press against him, dipping between his tight sphincter muscles. Lucius arched upward at the intrusion, but Hermione whispered, "Relax, love. You will enjoy this, I promise."

He panted, and her finger was replaced by a firm, vibrating nodule. "Oh, fuck me!" he exclaimed as the nodule sank into his anus, the lubricating liquid coating and easing its way.

"Yes, Lucius. I intend to, but I must taste you first." Hermione removed her hands from him, but her lips wrapped around his glans, and then she sucked, pulling his cock into her mouth as far as she could take him. The sensation of her pulling and the vibrating against his heretofore unknown organ caused Lucius to gurggle inarticulately.

Hermione grabbed her wand, cast a quick succession of spells, cleaning her hands, lowering Lucius to the bed, and releasing him from the bindings. The vibrations from his arse traveled along his erection, and he was deep into his own pleasure.

He barely noticed he was free to move until she straddled him, guiding him to her wet, hot quim, and then she slid down, but only a third of the way.

Yes! he thought. He wanted her impaled, wanted to feel the glorious friction of stroking in and out and in again.

Hermione's thighs flexed and she rose until the tip of his cock was inside her, but no more, and then she tightened her pelvic muscles, and Lucius groaned. Hermione leaned forward, her breasts brushing against his tight-budded nipples, her lips hovering over his. He flicked his tongue out to wet his lips and taste hers.

"How does it feel?" she asked, her voice low, insinuating.

"Unbelievable."

He suddenly realized he was no longer restrained, and his hands found her hips, grasping her tightly and pulling her onto him as he thrust up. The clenching of his cheeks tightened around the device in his arse, pressing it firmly against that magical organ and Lucius cried out as every nerve ending in his body fired off in excitement.

"Fuck!" he cried out, jerking in release; short, forceful thrusts up and into Hermione.

"Yes," she hissed, her word elongating on the sibilant. She tightened around him, so unbelievably wet, and then she reached between their bodies and pinched her clit, sending herself into spasms around his jerking, ejaculating cock.

She threw her head back, her hair tickling his thighs, if only he could have concentrated on the feeling it might have been arousing, but Lucius was floating in a sea of orgasmic paradise. His eyes rolled back in his head, and then, Lucius wasn't aware of much for several minutes.

Hermione removed the device, whispered a number of charms, some cleansing the toy, before snuggling against his side.

It took four or five minutes for the meaning behind one of the spells she'd cast to register, and when it did, Lucius jolted upright, or attempted to. Yet, Hermione was lying on his left shoulder and she'd pulled his left arm across her chest. The spell he so belatedly recognized had removed the glamour he had kept in place since the first time they had been intimate.

He had kept his Dark Mark concealed.

But now she was staring at it as intently as he stared at her. His heart pounded.

"So much grief, so much pain," Hermione murmured. Lucius tried to pull his arm away, but she held tight. "I'm not talking about what you did." She turned toward him. "I'm talking about what this mark has done ... to you ... to your family ... to so many others." Kissing him softly, she settled against him again.

"Why did you *finite* the charm?"

"I don't want you to hide from me."

"Do you think I'm hiding reminders of my sordid past?"

"You don't need to hide reminders of your past. I know who you are."

"Do you?" he asked roughly, sliding his arm from beneath her and rolling over, until he straddled her. "Do you really?"

She looked back, unafraid. "Yes, Lucius. I do."

He stared into her eyes for a long minute, and then catalogued her scars, and thought perhaps she spoke the truth. "What do you want, Hermione?"

"Just you."

He kissed her roughly, deeply, baring his soul for her, and then he bucked against her, his erection startlingly rampant for having just been so thoroughly depleted. "Open for me," he demanded, and as she complied, he thrust home. Hermione met him measure for measure, her ankles locking in place against his tender arse.

And finally, hours later, after she had fallen into an exhausted sleep against his chest, he believed her.

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*Excerpts from a letter written to Draco Malfoy, the Billiard Room, The Grange, Medstead, Hampshire, England by Lucius Malfoy, Master Bedroom, Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire, England*

*Dear Son,*

*Your letter found us before breakfast this morning, and I have my wife's as well as my own affections to send to you and Astoria.*

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*I certainly shan't ask you to refer to Hermione as 'Mum'. I shudder to think how she would react to such a request. You might consider it amusing, although you might bear in mind that the woman can throw a creative hex when the urge strikes her, as well you know. I have that on good authority.*

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*Yes, I will gladly accept yours and Astoria's congratulations. Scorpius already knows of my good fortune. He attended the ceremony with Rose and Hugo, and you needn't worry about legalities, Kingsley Shacklebolt performed the ceremony himself. You're quite right. I won't get out of this easily ... but Draco, I have no desire to sever my ties with Hermione.*

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*I suppose you could say I am happy, but that's such an inadequate word. In fact, I prefer the term content. I find, after all these years and thwarted ambitions, that I am content with my life. More content than I have been before your existence and Scorpius' being the notable exceptions to the rule, and Astoria, of course.*

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*The rumors about Hermione's becoming the next Minister for Magic are entirely false, I assure you. As highly as I regard her, she is too forthright for such an office, although I believe she will serve the Wizengamot well when she takes her seat during its next session. Head Mugwump is easily within her grasp.*

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*We expect you and Astoria Saturday next for Yule tree hunting and dinner. Scorpius, Hugo and Rose shall accompany us, and Rose tells me Scorpius was the fastest flyer Ravenclaw had seen in the past twenty-five years since his own mother flew Seeker for their team. Why has Astoria never mentioned her prowess on a broom?*

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*In the meantime, I add Hermione's regards to my own, and bid you an affectionate **bientot**,*

*As ever, your devoted father,*

*Lucius*

~\*~

Finite Incantatem