

A Lesson in Humility

by blue artemis

Lucius needs a lesson in humility to finally gets what he wants.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 8

Lucius needs a lesson in humility to finally gets what he wants.

Lucius stalked into the Headmaster's office, his face stony, his eyes ablaze and his hair blowing back a bit from his rapid pace. "Severus, everything has gone to Hades. Narcissa has filed for divorce--with cause. Couldn't you have held the letter?"

Severus stared blankly at his friend. "What bloody letter, Lucius?"

"The. Bloody. Hogwarts. Letter."

"Who in blazes would get a letter at the Manor?"

"I got the letter, because I'm the only living parent, and apparently, the owls required a response from a responsible adult, when she didn't reply timely."

"You aren't making any sense, Lucius. What letter?"

"The one addressed to Celeste Malfoy-Bonaventura!" Lucius had lost any aplomb he might have carried at this point and was practically hyperventilating.

"Did Draco have an affair on the continent?"

"Have you not been listening to me? She isn't Draco's, Severus. She's mine. Her mother wanted me to have nothing to do with her, but, Severus, you know my ancestry almost as well as I do. You know what it means for a Malfoy to have a daughter. Unfortunately, Narcissa intercepted the letter and thought the same thing you did until Draco informed her that he had no issue *on his wand*."

"She exercised her out clause then?"

"Oh, yes. She's already moved from the manor. She didn't know the significance of a girl; it isn't something I bandy about. Draco is waiting for me to explain. What do I do, Severus? Business is easy, family is not."

An unexpected voice came from the doorway. "Take control of the situation. Tell the media why a Malfoy girl-child is significant or drop hints that it matters. Find your daughter. For Merlin's sake, tell them your wife wouldn't have you in her bed after she bore your heir. Just don't let anyone bother the child." Lucius turned to see Hermione Granger standing there with Draco behind her.

"Severus... "

"Ah, Lucius, let me introduce you to my Deputy, Professor Hermione Granger, who is also the Transfiguration Mistress and will be Head of Gryffindor beginning this year, and of course, you know Draco, but you might not have known that he is to be the new Potions master and Head of Slytherin." Severus was rather delighted by the look of

consternation on Lucius's face.

"And how does Miss Granger know the importance of a girl-child to a Malfoy?" Lucius ground out from between clenched teeth.

"I told her, Father." Draco looked smug until his father's unyielding gaze got to him, and he looked down at his feet before looking back up at Lucius. "Who was the witch, and why did she matter so much?"

Hermione saw the look on Lucius's face and excused herself.

"You do not have to leave, Miss Granger. Since you had so many opinions on what I should do, and certainly since you will be one of her teachers, and possible Head of House, you may stay." Lucius did not realize how much his request sounded like a command.

Hermione narrowed her gaze at the imperious man, then came to some sort of internal decision and nodded, moving toward her favorite chair.

She's so much like Belinda... Lucius tore his gaze from the young woman and turned to look at all of his rather fascinated audience.

"Where to begin... the beginning, I imagine." Lucius sounded nothing like himself, but when Draco looked like he was about to speak, Hermione pinched his thigh, making him jump, but no longer about to interrupt. "Shortly after the second war, when we were barred from England for a period of two years, Narcissa and I went to Italy. She left me shortly after to pursue a paramour in Paris, and I attempted to re-invent Malfoy Industries. Unfortunately, I could no longer do that myself, due to the damage being a Death Eater did to my reputation. I required an intelligent person to fill the local CEO position...someone knowledgeable about both the Muggle world and the magical one. To that end, I found a Squib daughter of an old Italian wizarding family, the Bonaventuras. Belinda was, well, she was everything Narcissa was not: fiery, passionate, outspoken and more than willing to work hard. Not to disparage my ex-wife, she did everything she could to keep the family together and alive during the Year of Terror."

Hermione smiled to herself, she could hear the capitalization in his speech.

Lucius continued, unaware of Hermione's amusement. "Belinda had wild dark hair and sea-foam green eyes; she was stunning. She felt me to be 'imperious, impetuous and impossible'..." Lucius smiled at the memory, able to quote Belinda without trying. "But we worked well together, rebuilding my decimated business and restoring my fortune. She was worth every penny she was paid as the CEO of Malfoy Italy, which caters to the Muggle side of my businesses. She helped me form new business contacts and to build upon my hard times as proof that I could, in fact, work hard."

Lucius took a deep breath, and saw that he had captivated his audience. Draco was starting to show signs of understanding how his sister came to be, Severus looked a bit jealous, and Hermione, well, she just looked to be lost in the romance of it all.

"I never told her how much she meant to me, not in bed, not at work, never. It is one of my biggest regrets. I'm quite certain Belinda thought I considered her one of my many conquests. She knew that Narcissa and I lived separate lives. Thinking back on it, I doubt I understood the depth of my connection to her, never having experienced love before, until she told me of the child she was carrying, as well as the fact that the child was a girl."

"Why didn't you just tell her what a girl meant, Father?"

"I stuck very closely to my upbringing and decided that telling her of my love would give her a weakness to exploit. Instead, I signed her death warrant."

"Why would you say that, Mr. Malfoy?" Hermione was genuinely intrigued.

"I didn't know that the Bonaventuras were very good at masking a child's accidental magic, channeling the energy in some way to the wards. Although she was a Squib, Belinda was easily able to add the correct runes to the wards; one of her cousins made the potion for her. But like the Borgias and other Italian families, money begets poisoners. Around three years ago, Belinda's health began to decline. Had she been more willing to rely on me, I could have told her it was a slow-acting poison. As it is, when she finally did call me, it was far too late. I have sent a few letters over the years, but they were returned unopened. I believe the child thinks I had her mother murdered." Lucius bowed his head, his distress evident.

Severus's eyebrows were up into his hairline. "If she has family, Lucius, why would you receive the letter?"

When Lucius just shrugged, not knowing the magical intricacies of Hogwarts letters.

"None of her immediate family is magical, and the Malfoys must have asked for the 'magical-issue' clause when they sent their first child here." Hermione's lecture tone made Severus roll his eyes at his new Deputy.

"I am just appalled at your manners, Professor. I had asked Lucius the question, not you. Did I miss the over excited hand-waving, Professor Granger?"

"I don't know, Headmaster... did you?" Hermione's cheeky grin made both Malfoys laugh.

Trying to keep the verbal sparring to a minimum, Lucius interjected, "Exactly, Professor Granger." He knew better than to call her Miss after Severus had so pointedly used her title. One or the other would hex him, and he wasn't up to dealing with it.

"So, back to my original problem, what am I to do about this?" Lucius addressed his question to the room at large.

"I have a series of ideas, if you wish to hear them, Mr. Malfoy." Hermione looked at Lucius warily.

Lucius laughed. When his seemingly inappropriate response trailed off, he spoke. "My dear Professor Granger, I more than anyone understand the value of public perception. I know very well that if it appears that you are on my side, or at least the child's side, things will go far more easily for her. Tell me what you think I should do."

"First off, we should tell Harry." She raised her hand to quell any objections. "He and Draco have become friends, more so since Ron and Ginny both left to play Quidditch. He, more than anyone, could be her champion, since he lived through something similar. You know, come to think of it, we may want to see what Ginny Weasley is willing to do, as well. Ever since her experiences her first year, she has donated quite a bit of her time to the pediatric psychological trauma ward at St. Mungo's" The men all nodded thoughtfully. "Next, if she is uncomfortable at Malfoy Manor, maybe she can stay here with Draco. It will give her a sense of safety, and since you are allowed by the wards to visit at any time, you can begin to build your relationship with her. If you have any letters or other communications showing you were trying to care for her, you should give copies to Draco so he can give them to her. Most definitely give her any information that shows why a girl-child is so important to a Malfoy."

"This is good, sensible advice, Professor. But what of the press? This is not something I know how to do... make myself likable and a victim. It goes against my very soul." Lucius' impassioned response in his distinctive aristocratic drawl caused Hermione to blush.

Severus noticed the blush. *So the little lioness has a weakness for attractive blonds. I wonder how she is going to deal with her discomfort.*

Hermione gathered herself, used to dealing with her body's inconvenient reaction to various attractive men...and their annoyingly sexy voices. She smiled at Lucius, a smile he recognized, being a predator himself most of the time. "Mr. Malfoy, I want you to know that I am giving you this next bit of advice because I feel for your little girl, not because I've suddenly found a soft spot for you. Hit the press hard. Don't tell them exactly why a girl-child is so important, but tantalize them with hints. You obviously have your heir, and most Malfoys did not procreate past that, even with their mistresses. Play their sympathy... don't let your ex-wife do it first." As Lucius was processing her unexpected instruction, Hermione turned to Draco. "I'm sorry, Draco, I know your mother loves you and you love her, but I have a feeling she is going to try to turn this little girl into a pariah. Don't let it happen. If nothing else, *you* can give Celeste a safe-haven."

Both Malfoys nodded at Hermione, then at each other. They took their leave, with Lucius turning back as he walked out the door, saying, "I will send you an owl with the best time for you and Mr. Potter to meet Celeste, Professor; I thank you for your assistance. I am in your debt."

"How did you do that, Hermione?"

"Do what?"

"Present the man with all the pertinent facts, despite whatever inappropriate thoughts you may have been distracted by at the time?" Severus stated with a superior smirk, black eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Oh, I've had lots of practice, Severus. It takes practice and a little talent to appear sweet and innocent when some Wizard with presence and a sexy voice turns your inside to mush." Hermione winked at him as she strode out of the office, leaving a rather stunned man in her wake. She saw his stunned visage and grinned. *That was fun!*

What the bloody hell did that mean? She couldn't have been flirting with me, could she?

Hermione walked quickly down the hallway to her quarters. She plopped into her favorite chair in front of the fire and took a deep drink from the glass of chilled Muscat wine the elves had ready for her.

How could she have let herself show how she felt about Lucius Malfoy? She must have been ridiculously obvious if Severus had called her on it... She'd always thought the elder Malfoy was a rather safe object of fantasy...considering how completely unlikely it was she'd ever have to deal with him or that he would be single. And what was she going to do about Severus? She pretty much just told him he turned her on as well. "A worry for another day, right, Fuzzball?" Her new familiar just looked at her and meowed. She moved to her desk and wrote letters to Harry and Ginny, then prepared herself for bed.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 8

The plot thickens.

Lucius walked out of the Headmaster's office and strode briskly down the road to Hogsmeade so that he could Apparate back to the manor. He turned quickly, wand out, when he realized he was being followed. He dropped his wand to his side when he realized it was his son.

"What do you need from me, Draco?"

"Nothing, Father. I was only trying to see if you needed me for something. I know you and Mother were certainly not a love match, but I'm afraid Hermione is right, and she will try to make Celeste take the blame for your peccadillo."

"Your concern for your sister is touching, Draco. Now, what do you want?"

Draco smirked. "Nothing more than I already have... front seat tickets to whatever happens between you and Hermione. A little Severus thrown into the mix, and the results could definitely be explosive."

Lucius quirked an eyebrow at his inappropriately amused son.

"Father, I *know* you and Severus are more than just best friends. I also know the two of you like witches as well. I just find it quite interesting that the first time I see you both show an interest in the same witch, she's actually interested back, and both of you are oblivious about it. Have you ever thought of pursuing her together? It isn't as though triads are unheard of." Draco looked at his father and saw when the impossible became attainable in his mind. "Think about it, will you? That is one witch I can truly say would want you both for yourselves, and not for your wealth or power."

"May I ask why you would think that Professor Granger would be interested in either me or Severus?"

"Tut, tut, Father. Why should I give you the information out of the goodness of my heart? What is in it for me? Just know that I know... too much knowledge might put her off, you know."

Lucius nodded, thoughtfully. Then instead of continuing toward Hogsmeade, he turned abruptly and walked quickly back to the castle.

Draco looked back at his father's rapidly disappearing figure and smiled. He and Hermione had spent quite a bit of time together helping Severus get the school ready for September. She had heartily approved of his burgeoning friendship with Harry. Continuing her streak of relationships that lasted all of half an hour, Draco and Hermione had shared one disastrous kiss, which luckily had ended with them laughing and actually strengthening their relationship, which had become rather familial. They had spoken at length, especially when Draco had teased Hermione about her attraction to Severus.

"It's obvious to a Slytherin, Hermione. You catch your breath before you speak, you blush a bit, and you shift in your seat. You think he's attractive, don't you?"

"Bother. Why do I always find myself attracted to completely inappropriate, older Slytherin men?"

When Draco just goggled at her admission, Hermione persisted. "Tell me!"

"Because you need more of a challenge than a hormone-driven Gryffindor?" Draco smiled when he made her laugh. "Oi, wait, you said men. Who are the others?"

Draco had decided his father was a possibility when Hermione just blushed and refused to speak any more on the subject.

He had seen his father's tells as well during the conversation in the office: the way Lucius leaned toward Hermione, his willingness to listen and to implement her plan. Something about the witch called to him, and after he heard the description of Belinda, he understood.

This is going to be fun to watch.

Severus had just settled into his favorite chair in his sitting room when he was startled by Lucius's return.

"Did you forget something, Lucius?"

"Just this," replied Lucius as he knelt down beside Severus's chair. He took Severus's face in his hands and kissed him.

"What brought that on? I was quite certain you had decided to pursue Hermione when you left this afternoon."

"I had. But then Draco brought it to my attention that she finds you attractive as well, so I came back to see what you thought of the situation."

"What would you like me to say? In any battle for a woman's hand, I do not believe that I would be the victor. If you are interested, I shall settle for friendship with the lovely Hermione."

"What if there was another possibility, Severus? Would you be willing to set all the tongues wagging?"

"Whatever can you mean, Lucius?"

"A triad."

Severus swallowed loudly. "For Merlin's sake, Lucius, what happened to your subtlety?"

"I have too many things in the air right now, Severus. I cannot have you angry with me for courting a woman you are attracted to as well. I apologize for dumping Celeste's existence in your lap the way I did... I was quite certain when I stormed in here earlier that you had seen her parentage in your book and sent the letter in revenge."

"I have always known that our relationship would be secondary, Lucius."

"Our relationship has only been secondary in public. I have always regretted relegating it to the shadows, but my marriage contract prohibited any sort of amendments."

Severus nodded at that. "Revenge, really? You think I would stoop to sending a letter revealing your infidelities to the manor? You think so little of me?"

Lucius shook his head regretfully. "I realized my mistake as soon as I came in and saw your confusion. The only good that came of my imprudent action was that I gave Professor Granger a reason to see me as a man and not a nightmare brought to life."

Severus laughed. "This is a night of firsts for me." Lucius looked at him questioningly. "First of all, I noticed Hermione was a bit aroused by your voice, and after you left, I called her on it. Instead of being flustered, she flirted with me. Then you come back and offer me a relationship I have dreamed of since I was twelve and read the true story of Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere. Are you certain we didn't get into the absinthe again?"

Lucius threw his head back and laughed unabashedly. "Considering we are talking about courting one of the prickliest Gryffindors to walk these halls since Minerva McGonagall was a young woman, I have an illegitimate daughter that thinks I tried to have her assassinated and Narcissa is going to behave like a harpy when she realizes I am interested in establishing a permanent, public relationship with you and a woman who is not remotely like her--perhaps I can see your point. However, I can assure you this is not a green fairy-induced hallucination." He glanced out the window and saw the sky darkening. "I should leave; it is getting dark."

"You can plot just as well here, Lucius. Narcissa is no longer a concern. And after that kiss, you don't think you are getting away that easily, do you?" Severus's voice was seductive.

"Never let it be said that I turned down comfort of any sort, Severus."

Severus smirked at his long-time friend. "Work before play, I'm afraid. Would you mind giving me some assistance with this mound of parchment to ensure I can afford an evening of leisure?"

Lucius conjured a chair across from the Headmaster's desk and settled himself elegantly upon it. "Whatever will be most efficacious, my dear Severus," he replied with a gleam in his eye. "And will you banish the portraits from the room for the evening?"

"I will think about it. Since the portraits are sworn to silence about any private affairs in this office, I occasionally consider torturing Dumbledore with what he never had: a relationship of equals."

The men smiled at each other, and then Severus pulled out his beginning-of-the-year lists he needed to check and gave Lucius a sheaf of parchment and some quills. Neither one was so young that they needed immediate physical consummation of their plan. There was something to be said for anticipation.

Hermione was sitting at the High Table for breakfast the next morning, enjoying a mug of coffee and some toast with butter and jam, when she noticed Lucius and Severus enter the Great Hall together.

Did Lucius just touch Severus's hand? I know they believe they are being surreptitious, but that is more than just friendly. Here I thought I had a chance. They were both playing like they were interested. Playing must be the operative word, darn it. I thought I had a chance... at something. Never mind.

Severus noticed Hermione's perusal, then the shake of her head, but he could not fathom what would have made her unhappy. He and Lucius walked up the table and took seats on either side of Hermione.

"Good morning, Hermione."

"Good morning, Headmaster."

"Are we back to titles, then, Professor? You thought better of your behavior yesterday?" Severus reverted to what Hermione referred to as his Snape persona when he was uncertain.

"My behavior, Headmaster?" Hermione was incredulous at his audacity. "I didn't start the conversation. Don't blame your lack of manners on me."

"No, I suppose I cannot. My apologies, Professor Granger. I will no longer presume on a perceived friendship. I see I was in error."

Hermione just shook her head again. There were so many things she wanted to say and question and rant about, but breakfast was not the place for it.

Unfortunately, Hermione was not going to get any respite from her thoughts. Lucius spoke from her other side.

"Good morning, Professor Granger."

"Good morning, Mr. Malfoy."

"Have you been able to contact Mr. Potter and Miss Weasley?"

"Yes, I sent owls last night before I went to bed. Harry should be here later today; I am having the elves prepare guest quarters for him. Ginny has yet to respond, but that is not surprising, as she is in Bulgaria."

Lucius leaned toward her and took her hand. "My thanks for your promptness and attention to my situation."

Hermione withdrew her hand as quickly as she could without yanking it away from him. "As I said, Mr. Malfoy, I would not wish any harm to a child, even if she is yours." Her response startled Lucius, as he did not expect such a cold response due to their seeming understanding the day before. Just as Severus did before him, Lucius drew back into the "Malfoy mask" he was known for, none of the warmth or caring regard evident at all.

Hermione was almost amused by the responses from both men. *What, they didn't like that their prey grew some fangs? Not as though I'm going to get a response if I ask why they were toying with me in the first place. I must say, I like being the reason for their consternation. A confused Slytherin is a cold Slytherin, I see.*

Draco watched the entire thing with dismay. Somehow his father and Severus had bollyxed up their courtship before it even began. *I need to talk to her. I have to find out what went wrong.*

Hermione ate her breakfast quickly and got up to return to her rooms, her morning ruined by what she believed to be a Slytherin plot to humiliate her.

Draco saw her get up and followed her.

"Granger!"

He was ignored. If anything, Hermione walked even faster.

"Granger!" Draco started to run to catch up.

"Grang...Hermione, please! Please stop, I need to talk to you!" Draco was pleading as he grabbed for her arm.

Hermione stopped. "What do you want, Draco? Were you in on it? Want to rub my nose in it? I thought we had gotten past all that, but I guess I was wrong." The last was choked out as though she were trying to hold back a sob.

"In on what, Hermione?"

"Draco, I saw your father run his finger down Severus's arm. Severus didn't flinch. Therefore, they are together, and I have no idea why either one of them was showing any interest in me unless it was some bizarre plot to humiliate me, or, or, or a bet!"

Draco sighed loudly.

"I was right! It's a bet!" Hermione's voice was getting shriller and shriller.

She didn't realize that Severus and Lucius had followed Draco at a discreet distance and were currently skulking in the shadows, eavesdropping. The two men looked at each other in dismay. They hadn't realized, in their comfort with each other and their mutual decision to pursue Hermione, that the witch would decide they were playing with her.

"No, love, it isn't a bet. But you don't know much about traditional wizarding sexual mores, and no, the Weasleys do not count." Draco was emphatic.

"You mean the rather Victorian method of arranged, loveless marriages? I actually thought your mother and father loved each other until you started telling me their history. They are very good actors."

"My mother and father treasured the family they created. Mother left because she had an out clause if Father had a child out of wedlock. She feels humiliated, even though they privately led separate lives. They did not particularly like each other, and that caused all of the problems. Mother is too much of a Black, and Father, well, he chose the wrong way to rebel against his father. Voldemort was seen as a means to an end, part of which was restoring proper pureblood culture. Obviously, that was a mistake."

Hermione snorted at the understatement, the sound covering up the rustling from the shadows. Severus had to hold Lucius back after that little admission.

"What do you mean, Draco? If they are together and happy, then why flirt with me? Why raise my hopes? Because they could? You know my limited experience with men. I thought I finally found a man or men who weren't either intimidated by *Hermione Granger, war heroine*, or want to break me."

"I'm sorry, love. I wish you had a chance to get to know them better before you made assumptions. Go to the library, and ask Madam Pince for the book titled: *Camelot, Fact and Fiction*. It will actually answer some of your questions. Please?"

Hermione stared at her friend. He looked so earnest, and he was begging. He also knew better than to have her speak to either his father or Severus until she had some research under her belt. "Fine, Draco. I will. But if that doesn't give me an idea as to why you still think there is a possibility, you will wish you had ticked off the Weasley Twins, do you understand?"

Draco nodded. Hermione jerked her arm out of his hand, since he had yet to let go, and stormed off toward the library.

"Thank you, Draco." Severus's rich voice came from the shadows.

Draco turned to see Severus and Lucius step out into the middle of the corridor. "Didn't you two think that if you piqued her interest, she wasn't going to study you as closely as anything else she finds worth pursuing? You almost ruined everything before it started!"

"Do not scold us, my son. You sound like a fishwife. Or Molly Weasley. Things will work out well, I am quite certain."

Draco shook his head at the two men, then walked toward his quarters to change into flying robes and pick up his broom. Flying had always helped him keep his temper before, and he needed to relieve his annoyance before he said or did something rash.

Chapter 3

The plot thickens.

No matter how angry she was, Hermione just couldn't bring herself to slam open the door to the library, even though she really wanted to. She stalked up to Irma Pince's desk, hair crackling, hands fisted and a grimace on her face instead of a smile. "Good morning, Irma. Do you have a book on the true story of Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere? I've been directed to it by Professor Malfoy."

Hermione was taken aback when Irma smiled. "I was wondering when you were going to ask about that."

"Really, why?"

"I'm observant, my dear. I've seen the way the Headmaster has been nosing around you, and seeing how the former Mrs. Malfoy was ranting at her relatives' portraits, Headmaster Black has informed us all that Mr. Malfoy is single again. I can put two and one together quite well, you know."

"I do know, Irma. But after all of this settles, I'm going to demand that a class on wizarding culture get added to the curriculum. I truly hate all this societal knowledge floating around me. It is very off-putting."

"I know, dear. But you often charge in to situations without researching. There are quite a few things that general good manners do not cover. There aren't very many etiquette books out there because the families were expected to teach their children, but we have a lot of stories and legends that provide the basis for a lot of the mores, especially the very ingrained ones that make wizarding culture so very different from Muggle. Good manners appear to be universal, but beliefs and traditions often have a basis in what you would term mythology."

"My apologies, Irma."

"For what, my dear?"

"I often forget just how learned you must be. Thank you. I appreciate how kindly you just pointed that out instead of making me feel inferior. You have given me a concrete research subject. Could you please add some books you believe would help me in this endeavor?"

"Most certainly, Hermione. Hold on one second." Irma raised her wand and waved it in an intricate pattern. Hermione watched in awe as a few books flew from the shelves and arranged themselves neatly on the desk in front of her. The sheer breadth of knowledge Madam Pince had of what was in the library was astounding.

"Thank you, Irma," Hermione said as she picked up the stack of books. She turned and walked back out of the library, only to bump into Harry, who figured he would find her in her favorite place.

"Sorry, 'Mione!" Harry apologized as he carefully caught the two books that fell off the top of her pile.

"It's OK, Harry. I'm glad to see you! Let's take these books to my quarters, and I can explain a bit more about the situation, all right?"

"Sure." Harry was studying the books he caught. "Why are you reading about Camelot, Druid rituals and the mythology of multiple-marriages?"

"I'll explain that too. I could probably use another opinion. Just promise me you won't start ranting, OK?"

"I have a few things to tell you, as well. I think we can say we should mutually not rant. How's that sound?"

"It sounds interesting. I agree."

They laughed and walked down the corridor, toward the staircase that would lead to her rooms.

Draco grabbed his broom and almost ran out to the Quidditch pitch. He wanted to kick himself. *I always forget that she doesn't know things the way I expect her to. She understands so much, but she never learned the histories and mythology that we all take for granted.* "Well, she's a smart girl. She'll figure it out."

"Who will figure what out?"

Draco almost jumped out of his skin. "Oh, it's you, Red. Good to see you again. I take it you are responding to an owl? In answer to your question: Hermione. She will figure out that it is just fine for two wizards to pursue her together."

"That is excellent! Ron is going to just about burst out of his skin. And trust me, he deserves it... Do tell, which two wizards?"

"Ginevra Weasley, you don't expect me to gossip, now, do you?" Draco had drawn himself up, looked down his nose, and drawled in his best aristocratic tones.

Ginny looked at him, ready to rip into him, and then realized the corner of his upper lip was twitching. She threw her head back and laughed.

"When did you get so funny, Draco?"

"I've always been funny. You just didn't realize it."

She thought about it for a bit, then shrugged her shoulders in a noncommittal assent. "Were you out here to fly?" Ginny nodded her head at his broom.

"Yes, I need the wind to clear my head."

"Would you mind some company? I had come out to fly as well. Harry went to find Hermione, and I'm sure that they will take a while catching up, considering what's been going on with him."

"Do tell, Ginevra." Draco smiled as he parroted her earlier comment.

"Not on your life, Draco. Let's fly!"

He nodded, and mounting his broom, he shot into the sky with Ginny following close behind. Had anyone looked out of the castle, they would have witnessed some amazing aerial acrobatics.

Severus and Lucius returned to the Headmaster's Office rather stunned by the turn of events.

They had just walked in the door when Severus picked up a paperweight made of glass and flung it at Dumbledore's portrait. "You have caused no end of trouble by not allowing the Muggle-borns to be taught wizarding culture, old man. If she is not appeased by her research, I am going to burn your portrait... with you in it!"

"Now, now, Severus. Miss Granger is a very bright little witch. She will realize your intentions are honorable soon enough. Although I would prefer if you do not bind me to this portrait if you plan to entertain her here."

"You did say I could choose your penance for forcing me to kill you, Albus. It isn't my fault you were impotent when that portrait was painted."

"I had to shove the shepherdesses right out of their painting to use the cooling river near their pasture after last night, Severus. They didn't want to leave!"

Albus looked quite put out when Lucius started laughing and left his portrait in a huff when Severus joined him.

"Oh, Merlin, Severus. That was an absolutely brilliant punishment. However did you figure out he was impotent when the portrait was painted?"

"Potter."

"Excuse me? The same Potter you once claimed was born just to make you miserable?"

Severus glared at Lucius in an attempt to quell his amusement, but realized his long-time love was having far too much fun for that, so he began to explain. "Albus kept calling for Potter, in the hopes of making us friends, but I would leave when they would start talking. Partway through this exercise in futility, Potter gave me a coin that Hermione had charmed; it had been the youngest Weasley's, and he would call me if there was anything interesting going on in the conversation. I would listen outside the door. I learned that boy was misused and mistreated far more than I had considered, but I also learned some of the old coot's secrets. When he discovered what Potter was doing, they had an argument. Potter hasn't been to the office since."

"I had wondered when you began to tolerate him and why. That does explain a lot. I was a bit bothered by you keeping secrets."

"Lucius, I never thought there would be a reason for you to interact with Potter, or I would have told you. You didn't react well when Draco pursued a friendship with him. I did not need that from you regarding our new and rather fragile truce." Lucius nodded. It was something they were going to have to learn to change, this desire to keep aspects of their lives separate from each other.

Severus saw that Lucius accepted his explanation, so he continued to speak. "He also learned a charm that would make Albus's lemon drops taste like frog slime for twenty-four hours. I sent him a long letter of memories of his mother for that one."

Lucius contemplated that for a little while. "That is almost Slytherin. So was the way he freed that horrid little Dobby. Is there anything else I should know?"

The blond was shocked when the Sorting Hat answered. "You need to befriend him or at least gain his trust if you wish this courtship to proceed. He will come up here after he learns of Professor Granger's misgivings. You must not play your usual games with him. One of his problems with the Slytherin way of doing things is that it reminds him of the worst of his uncle and cousin. Through his friendship with your son, he is learning that isn't true, but he still will want some sort of reassurance he can count on."

Severus broke in. "Thank you, Alain. I appreciate your candor."

"I live to serve, Headmaster. And you don't mind my conversation." The hat appeared to go back into its resting state while Lucius and Severus sat together on the couch in front of the fire, hands entwined, deep in thought.

"So, what's been going on, Harry?"

"You first, 'Mione... I need to get my courage up before I tell you."

"Harry, you know *nothing* you can tell me will make me stop being your friend."

"True, you are a much better friend than Ron. But you first, please, OK?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Fine. I find myself attracted to both Severus and Lucius, and I think they are interested back, but I saw them touching, no, nothing salacious, but it is obvious that they are 'together,' and now I don't know. Draco says I should read about Camelot, the 'true' story, and then Irma gave me these other books to read. I really would like someone I don't scare to love me, you understand, don't you?"

"Wow, Hermione. I think you said that all in one breath!"

Hermione whacked him across the back of the head.

Harry smiled sheepishly. "Oi!" Hermione glared at him. "Sorry, 'Mione. I just thought that was funny. So, let me get this straight: you have fallen for the banes of our childhood, and you aren't sure they are interested back because they are in a sexual relationship?"

Hermione nodded.

"Makes what I have to tell you a bit less of a shock, then."

Hermione growled at him.

Harry laughed, then ducked as her hand came toward him again. "What do I think of two of the most powerful wizards I've ever met pursuing my best friend, the closest thing I have to family on this earth? I think you need to read the true story of Camelot. And then believe me when I say I don't think they are toying with you."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "OK, I need to read that book. And probably these others. But you are certain, Harry?"

"Yes, I am. I don't think that Severus knows how to play with a witch using himself as bait anyway." He and Hermione shared a smile. "By the way, I'm so sorry you felt you had to choose sides after my trip to Romania."

"Ron was an idiot. You should have heard him after I told him you weren't the only one who had slept with Charlie."

Hermione giggled as Harry goggled at her.

"You too?"

Hermione just giggled again.

Harry grinned. "I bet he never thought we would say anything to each other. We should write him a letter."

"Yes, especially if you liked that thing he does with that pierced tongue of his as much as I did. But you've gotten off the subject."

Harry tapped his foot nervously before he began to speak. "Remember when I told you I was going to Turkey? Well, you'll never guess who I ran into there Luna. Well, one thing sort of led to another, and we ended up spending the night together. I sort of just put it to the back of my mind as, you know, *'Wow, that was great but obviously she doesn't want to go anywhere with this...'* and yes, I still like witches too."

Hermione looked like she was about to speak, so Harry gently touched her leg to stop her.

"I need to get this out all at once." Hermione nodded. "Anyway, when I got to Sophia, I ran into her again. The attraction was still there, on both sides." Harry laughed to himself a bit. "Remember how blunt she can be? We were having drinks when she just blurts out that she thinks I should come with her and see if I'm compatible with her

other lover, Viktor."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Viktor Krum? He mentioned something about a relationship he wanted to tell me about the last time he wrote!"

Harry grinned. "Well, that would be me and Luna then. I decided to take a chance and trust Luna's instincts she's a bit odd but she's got great instincts. Anyway, the three of us have been together for a couple months now."

"And you couldn't tell me this earlier?" Hermione looked hurt. "I thought you trusted me!"

"Hermione, I do. But you grew up in the Muggle world like me. I figured I should tell you to your face... so I could see your face and make sure you understood. Ron had been so horrid about the whole thing... first Charlie, and then he almost put Ginny in the hospital when she mentioned she had seen me with Viktor and Luna. I couldn't bear to lose you both so that is why my last letter just said I had some news I had to tell you face to face. As it was, Luna had a bit of a time convincing me that triads were normal in wizarding society I'm just now getting Uncle Vernon's voice, telling me I'm a freak, out of my head."

Hermione stood up, walked over to Harry and gave him a big hug. "You are not a freak, Harry James Potter. You're wonderful. You're my best friend and don't you forget it," she stated emphatically. Then she grinned. "So, when's the wedding?"

"Probably around Yule. Ron is going to be in Australia with the Cannons then. Luna will be very glad to be able to ask you to stand for one of us. It has been one of her dearest wishes."

Hermione looked pensive for a moment. "Ron's ruined so very much, hasn't he? He's going to die when he finds out I'm seeing two of the people he hates most in this world."

"You've decided to give them a chance then?"

"I'm considering it, Harry. You're living a similar situation, and well, if this is acceptable, then it may be a relationship I wish to try."

"What made Lucius Malfoy become available all of a sudden?"

"You know, I thought you would have asked me why."

"Mione, you've always been interested in both of them, ever since your hormones kicked in. You blush and fidget around them."

"You and Draco! Don't I have any secrets?"

"Not from me; I've always watched you, Mione. You mean the world to me, you know? So, what happened to make Lucius Malfoy available?"

"Turns out he has an eleven-year-old daughter. There was an 'out' clause in their marriage contract: if either one had an out-of-wedlock child, the other could ask for and get an instant divorce. Narcissa left as soon as she found out the child was Lucius's and not Draco's. She's currently in Paris, nursing her wounds and plotting Lucius's downfall, I'm sure."

"So, you want me to help with the daughter?"

"Yes."

"Why did you call Ginny?"

"Because her mother died and she had to go live with relatives. I believe she may have some sort of psychological trauma to deal with."

"Her work with the hospital? Makes sense. And you figure I can relate to a child forced to live with relatives who may not have been pleased at the fact?"

"Exactly."

"There is something else, isn't there? Why is the fact that she is a girl twinging my spidey-sense?"

"Idiot. You don't have spidey-senses. Malfoys only have girls if they are in love with the mother of the child."

"Oooh. I guess that is how he's going to play the press."

"Yes. I told him to tease them with the idea that a Malfoy girl is something special, but not say anything outright."

"Good advice. I'm guessing you would like Luna involved?"

"Please. And you and she and Viktor all have to come over for dinner. I want to celebrate your new relationship with you."

"Definitely."

Harry waved good-bye as he walked out of Hermione's rooms and back up to the Headmaster's office.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 8

Harry tries to right a wrong.

Harry strode up to the Headmaster's office. *I failed Hermione once already, by not trusting her. She's always been more ready to accept and believe me than Ron. I won't fail this time. I need to make sure Snape and Malfoy are really not playing games with her.*

He reached the gargoyle and grinned when it winked at him and jumped aside to allow him onto the spiral staircase. He rode the staircase to the top, then blinked when the

door opened for him. He walked in and was amused by the fact that Lucius Malfoy was sprawled aristocratically on the sofa, with Snape leaning on him, both had books in their hands and were oblivious to their visitor. "All you are missing is Hermione, it seems. And how is it that you look posh while you sprawl, Mr. Malfoy?"

"I am 'posh' as you say, no matter what I'm doing, Mr. Potter," Lucius drawled in reply. "Severus, isn't the castle supposed to keep people from popping in unannounced?"

"Yes, but the castle is inordinately fond of Potter, here, and seems to be letting me know who will succeed me as Headmaster," answered Severus. "You try telling a building this old and magical what to do."

"I'm afraid she wouldn't let me up to your quarters ever again if I tried that," said Lucius.

Harry laughed. "Let's see, if I were the idiot you believe me to be, I would say, 'I'm glad you see you are relaxed enough to be yourselves around me,' but I'm not, so what exactly is this little performance all about?"

Lucius tossed his hair diffidently, then leaned forward and spoke. "What the blazes gave us away?"

"Your posture was a bit too stiff once you noticed I was here, and neither one of you is going to be that comfortable with me, no matter what," replied Harry.

Severus smirked and then sighed. "It's good to see you occasionally use the bit of Slytherin cunning you have, it is. Alain declared we needed to court you as well as Hermione; otherwise, she would never accept us. So, you are to be considered part of our 'Inner Circle' as it were.

Harry nodded. "At least you listen to the hat... it explains a bit. Just to make certain, you aren't playing games with Hermione? I don't need to vanquish anyone?"

"You can try!" answered both men.

"In stereo, even. Lovely. I get no blasted respect from either one of you. Come to think of it, Draco doesn't respect me, either. I do believe you will fit right in with my true friends," said Harry ruefully.

"What, Miss Weasley and Miss Granger do not respect you?" Lucius asked.

"They know me too well. Luckily, they love me," said Harry with a grin.

"I thought you and Miss Weasley had parted ways?" asked Severus, confused.

"Yes, but she is one of my best friends, along with Hermione and Draco." Harry took a deep breath, correctly reading the question in Severus's eyes. "No, Ron is no longer included in the list of my closest friends. If we become friendlier as a result of this situation I may tell you why." Harry turned to Lucius and addressed him directly. "So, when is Celeste going to get here? I am more than happy to provide support or be part of a support system. I know how hard it is when your parents are nothing more than stories to you."

"Tomorrow--and I'm afraid she may be very bitter. I do not wish for such a treasured child to hate me, Mr. Potter. I was not allowed to spend time with her before now, due to both circumstance and because I acceded to her mother's wishes. I would like to change that." He looked thoughtfully at Harry. "I will be greatly in your debt if you can help her in any way."

Harry nodded, a quirky half-smile on his face. "What is her family situation? Was it anything like mine?" He was bemused by the look of confusion on Lucius's patrician face. "Do you know if the relatives she is with are jealous of magic or angry at your wealth or anything along those lines? Relatives are not always the best people to raise a child they were not expecting."

"I believe Miss Granger was correct in recommending I speak with you, Mr. Potter." There was a new respect for Harry on Lucius's face, as well as a thoughtfulness in his expression. "She believes Miss Weasley would be willing to help. Do you think she would be willing, considering our past?"

Harry nodded. "Ginny's very caring and intuitive, but she's also really strong--had to be when she was the youngest and the only girl. She'd be a great role model..." Harry's voice trailed off as all three occupants of the room were distracted by the sight of two people flying impossibly fast by the windows.

"Wow! I've never even seen a braiding pattern flown that fast. And Viktor was teaching me to do it. Cool!" exclaimed Harry. He turned to leave, then realized he was being rude. "I'm sorry, Headmaster, Mr. Malfoy. If it's all right with you, I'd like to join them."

The Headmaster and Lucius Malfoy exchanged a knowing look, then looked back at Harry indulgently. Lucius rose to his feet and extended his hand. "I thank you for your consideration for my child." Harry shook Lucius' hand.

"You're welcome. And I look forward to meeting her, Mr. Malfoy."

"If we are to be, well, you spoke of friendship, Mr. Potter--you may as well call me Lucius. And..." Lucius paused, with a knowing smirk, "... I will hold you no longer. I do know something about the look on a young man's face when his mind is no longer in the room--but on his broom."

Harry chuckled. "Well, Lucius... you're right. And, before I go, you are both, of course, welcome to call me Harry. Now, I think I'm going to find out who that is and if they can give me a few pointers!" Harry smiled at both men and attempted to leave the room with dignity--while hurrying to the Quidditch pitch at the same time.

Harry hurried out to the Quidditch pitch, his face shining with awe at the intricate maneuvers being flown by the fliers. When they got closer, he realized the fliers were none other than Draco and Ginny. He gasped when Draco held his hand out to Ginny, and she laughed, then grabbed it, driving the two brooms into a spin. They let go, both brooms spinning them in opposite directions. Once they were right side up and had flown another couple of circuits around the pitch, they saw Harry and landed near him.

He applauded as they approached him. "Amazing flying, you two!"

"We're uncommonly well-matched in that regard," responded Draco.

Ginny just grinned. Then she thought about the reason they were called to Hogwarts in the first place and asked, "Harry, what do you think about this whole situation? Did you talk to Hermione? What about Mr. Malfoy?"

"Slow down, Gin. I talked to everyone. Celeste is arriving tomorrow. I think the best thing to do is just get to know her and let her know there are other people who have been wronged by people they called family." Harry ran his hand through his hair.

"Thank you for even considering this, Harry. I know my father isn't your favorite person," said Draco.

"No, but you have become a good friend, and this little girl wasn't part of anything your father ever did to me. I'm going to have to get over my animosity anyway, especially if his and Snape's plan for Hermione works out," Harry replied.

"They really are interested in her? Together?" Ginny was fascinated.

"They were interested in her separately, but she noticed them touching and put one and one together and got two. They are going to have to convince her the relationship is feasible." Draco snickered at the thought. "Actually, after hearing Father wax poetic about Celeste's mother, I see that his true ideal is very much a woman like Hermione. Severus, of course, likes intelligent Muggle-borns because if it was red-heads, he would have pursued you, Red."

"He sees me too much as an extension of my brothers, and well, we all know his opinions on them," Ginny answered.

"Gin, I'm starting to think your brothers aren't all that, I can't blame Severus, really," Harry said.

Ginny threw her arms around Harry in solidarity. "Ron is an immature jerk. He has the heart to be a wonderful person, yet he ignores it for his jealous streak most of the time. But don't you worry, the rest of us love you."

Harry had to laugh when Draco decided to join in the hug.

"Lucius, stop pacing. You already have Harry looking out for Celeste's interest as well as Hermione and Draco. I'm sure Miss Weasley will be more than happy to help; she wrote her entire family when you apologized that last year of the Dark Lord's reign of terror," soothed Severus.

"I am far too used to handling things myself, Severus, and this situation forces me to accept help. What am I to do?"

"Go see Hermione. Explain your need to control the situation. She is very much the same way. I'm sure she will help you find a way to cope." Severus waved Lucius off. "Just remember our agreement not to play with her separately!"

Lucius stared at his long-time love and realized that Severus was being as helpful as he knew how to be. *Severus' strength is his adaptability; he doesn't really understand how difficult this is for me. Not that I can argue, he managed to survive a life as a double agent.*

He strode quickly down the corridor, his long legs gaining ground easily. He arrived at Hermione's quarters and knocked on her door.

He was bemused when Hermione opened the door wearing an old Quidditch jersey that said Bulgaria on the front, and he assumed Krum on the back, her hair piled high on her head and held in place with a raven-feather quill. He didn't see any evidence of trousers or even those Muggle short trousers. He shook his head to regain his bearings. "Good evening, my dear. May I impose on you for a bit?"

"Certainly, Lucius. How may I help you?" Hermione's good manners kicked in, and she graciously stepped back to allow him into her rooms. "Please take a seat wherever you like. Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, tea would be good. It helps me think," replied Lucius.

Hermione nodded, then called out to a house-elf for tea, her special calming mixture. The tea arrived moments later, and they settled onto her sofa.

"You need my help then?" asked Hermione.

"I'm not certain, but Severus believes you could at least help me organize my thoughts about Celeste," he answered.

Hermione smiled beguilingly. "I *am* quite good at organizing. What exactly is worrying you?"

"As you well know, Hermione, I am quite used to being in charge, even if it is of things behind the scenes. I have no way of controlling this situation, I believe that if I am too involved to start with, I will never be able to have a relationship with my daughter. I need to back off and let other people provide her with support and succor her. It is almost untenable and quite unbearable," Lucius finished passionately. He was surprised when he felt Hermione's hand on his arm, and her leg pressed against his.

"It makes you human. None of us are going to keep you out of the loop, Lucius. You will know what is going on every minute, as well as you can, and no one who is willing to help you will make this difficult. In one way or another, everyone I've recommended you involve has lived through some sort of difficulty as a child and come through well. And then there is Draco, who could have become a spoilt, miserable man, and instead he's matured and become an excellent professor. Although we can't replace her mother, we can certainly give her a supportive set of adults," she said in a rush.

As Hermione spoke, Lucius was struck, again, by her passion for others and her similarity to Belinda. It had been far too long since he'd had a responsive woman to bed. Many women in his social circle had made clear they were available... but they were interested in his purse, not his passion. He realized how much he and Severus needed someone who was interested in *them*, what they had to offer as wizards, and not for their societal positions or wealth. Hermione's warm brown eyes sparkled with life and interest, her curly wild hair bounced as she gestured, and... well, he'd never really considered exactly how titillating a worn out Quidditch jersey could be. Lucius smirked. Suddenly, Lucius realized that Hermione had gone quiet. He blinked and refocused on the woman grinning at him with an expression that was both curious and amused.

"Were you listening at all? Or did your attention get drawn *elsewhere*?" Hermione asked.

"Ah, my apologies. I merely became impressed, yet again, by how passionately you speak of those you care for," Lucius explained smoothly.

Hermione smirked. "So, you were just distracted by my defense of Draco?"

"Perhaps your attire was somewhat distracting as well..." Lucius allowed.

"I hadn't exactly planned on entertaining visitors today, so I was aiming more for comfort, actually." Hermione explained as she recrossed her ankles and watched Lucius' eyes follow the movement. *Leg man, eh?* "But, if the distraction helps you, uh... relax from the stressful situation you find yourself in, then I suppose it's all to the good." Hermione teased with a saucy grin.

"Yes, it does at that." Lucius reached out to smooth some errant strands of hair out of her eyes... and developed an intense desire to tangle his fingers into that hair. Hermione was looking at him curiously, but she was not moving away. She seemed to be waiting to see what he'd do. He indulged himself by stroking her hair, then running his fingers into it and leaning over to sample her lips.

Hermione kissed him back tentatively at first, then with a bit more confidence as she became accustomed to him. They were interrupted by the Floo.

"Starting without me, are you?" Severus inquired smoothly.

"Merely getting to know each other a bit better. I assumed that you'd appear shortly when you pressed me to visit the lovely Professor Granger," Lucius responded with a smirk. He didn't let go of Hermione, even when she went to pull away. He continued speaking to Severus, "If you wish to join us, do so."

Hermione held her breath, not certain whether she was more worried about Severus leaving or taking Lucius up on his offer.

Chapter 5

We finally meet Celeste. This chapter has descriptions of past child abuse.

Hermione looked up at the wizard sitting next to her on the sofa. *I can't believe I was flirting with Lucius Malfoy!* She looked toward her fireplace at the Headmaster, who appeared to be uncertain of his welcome. Just as he started to move toward the sofa to join Lucius and Hermione, the fireplace blazed.

"Mione? I need you to come to Draco's quarters. Celeste is here. If you know where the Headmaster is, please call him as well. And if someone is available to contact the Aurors, I would appreciate it," Ginny's voice had the flat, unresonant sound of someone trying to stay calm in the face of horror, scaring the wits out of the three in the room.

Hermione quickly found her voice. "I'll be right there, Ginny. The Headmaster will be with me. And the Aurors and whatever international authority necessary will be contacted as well."

Lucius looked furious and worried, imagining the most horrible things he could think of having happened to his daughter; maybe she had been bitten by a werewolf or turned into a vampire or worse, raped or tortured. He whispered furiously at Hermione and Severus, "Tell me what is wrong as soon as possible. I will be contacting the authorities."

Hermione nodded at him as she threw some Floo powder into the flames and called out, "Professor Malfoy's quarters!" She stepped through and looked around frantically. Her eyes alighted on a beautiful girl with strawberry-blonde curls and stunning sea-foam green eyes surrounded by dark lashes. Unfortunately the girl also had a black eye and what appeared to be her jaw magically wired shut.

Draco and Harry were weaving all sorts of detection spells over the child, so she looked at Ginny. "What in the world happened?" Hermione asked, making sure the Floo was left open, so Lucius could hear the response.

"Her aunt showed up and said that they could no longer 'stomach' having the 'abomination' in their home. She then said that such a child should have never been under the family's protection much less the heir to her sister. That was when Harry hit her with a truth-telling spell. Turns out she and her children were set to inherit Belinda's portion of the Bonaventura money until Celeste was born. Since she was magical, she not only inherits Belinda's portion but will have access to the magical portion of the family's treasures. She was jealous and so has been telling Celeste what a horror her father was and how he tried to have her killed. Unfortunately for Aunt, Belinda had left her daughter a letter telling her how Lucius always did love her and wanted the best for her. She also hinted at a secret held only by Malfoy daughters. Celeste made the mistake of saying she was looking forward to meeting the man her mother had loved, when she got punched by one of her cousins, then her uncle, who broke her jaw. They tried to cover it up with a glamour." Ginny's voice had gotten higher and higher pitched. She was furious.

"So, this jaw-wiring effect is due to a mis-cast glamour?" Severus was appalled.

"Not quite," answered Harry. "It looks like they were trying to silence her as well, and this happened."

Seconds later, Lucius rushed through the Floo, followed by Andromeda Tonks, who was the current Head Healer at St. Mungo's, and Remus Lupin, the current head of the DMLE.

He knelt on the ground by his daughter and stroked her hair, the look on his face conveying his need to make her better. Celeste looked at him and, seeing the same expression her mother had worn every time she had been hurt, threw her arms around Lucius's neck and sobbed silently.

Andromeda came close and waved her wand over the girl, a slightly different diagnostic than what Harry and Draco had done. "You boys were right, but this was a medical Silencing Spell, which with the glamour, combined into this atrocity. Don't worry, I can fix it." She waved her wand again, saying, "*Finite Incantatum Medicinalis!*" The jaw-wiring spell cancelled out. Andromeda then pointed the wand directly at Celeste and said, "*Revelare Tuum Verum Se!*"

Everyone's eyes went wide in horror. The girl's hair had been chopped roughly, about three inches from her scalp. The black eye was not the only bruise, and she was showing signs of malnutrition.

Remus started to document everything as well as he could, which became very hard for him to do through the tears in his eyes after Harry knelt down next to Lucius.

"Hi, Celeste. My name's Harry."

Celeste stared at him a bit, then reached out to brush his fringe out of his eyes. "Your scar is very faint," she said in a rough whisper.

"Yes, I can just be myself now, and not be defined by a mark on my head. Your aunt wasn't happy to take care of you, was she?"

The girl just stared, unwilling to reveal the depths of the abuse she had lived through.

"My aunt wasn't either. Albus Dumbledore, thinking he knew better than everyone else, left me on her doorstep like an unwanted puppy. He had dosed me with a sleeping potion, to make sure I didn't leave, but I could have frozen. It was November. She had been jealous of my mother's magic and blamed me for living when her sister died. She used me as a house-elf, she starved me, let her son beat me and her husband lock me into my room for days at a time. She never took me to the doctor. So, I know a little about being stuck with people who would rather be raising a rabid monkey... Don't worry, little one. Even if no one else were to want you and want to raise you, I would. But your daddy there has been looking forward to meeting you and so has your brother. Could you tell us what happened so we can make sure they can never mistreat another child?"

Celeste looked at the man in front of her, who had so matter-of-factly recited his childhood of horror, and then at the others in the room, most of whom were dabbing at the tears in their eyes and nodded. "Aunt Raquel said I was an abomination. After Mama died, she told the other relatives she was caring for me, but... She would only feed me one cup of milk and some bread for breakfast every day. She didn't always feed me lunch or dinner. She said I shouldn't have had magic, then her children would inherit everything, and she could purge the family of the taint of magic. She lied about Papa. She said he had raped Mama and I was the result. She said he never loved me." The little girl took a deep breath. "For a long time I believed her, and I didn't want to see Papa, because if he loved me, why would he have left me there? But Mama had letters, and I found them recently. She said Papa had put money in the bank for me, but she wanted to keep Aunt away from my money, so she told them there wasn't any. And she said he was always proud of having a daughter. So when I got the letter from Hogwarts, explaining that Papa's family would take care of my schooling, I knew what Aunt said just wasn't true. When I called her a liar, she let my cousins and my uncle beat me. Then she paid a hedge-witch to cover it up and sent me here," Celeste replied, crying. She turned back toward her father, who enveloped her in his arms.

"You are not an abomination, you are a treasure, mi tesoro," Lucius whispered to the little girl in his arms. "Are you willing to come home with me so we can get you all healed up? I will be able to introduce you to everyone properly, as well."

Celeste nodded into his shoulder.

Lucius picked up his precious burden and walked toward the Floo. "Draco, you, Miss Weasley and Harry give Mr. Lupin all the information you can. As the head of the DMLE, he can make some connections to Law Enforcement in Italy. I need her relatives punished." He started to pick up the Floo powder when he turned to Andromeda. "Healer Tonks, I apologize for asking, but did you find any of Narcissa's magic at work here?"

"No, Mr. Malfoy, I did not. Why do you trust me to tell you if I did? She is my sister, and you are the reason I did not get to see her for so many years."

"Because Celeste is an innocent child, and I would hope that your better nature would see that and not my blood."

Andromeda nodded bitterly. She had risen to her position as Head Healer for St. Mungo's following the war. She knew what Lucius said was true. And he had made a point, at least twice that she knew of, of protecting Nymphadora from Bellatrix, even casting a tripping hex at her during the final Battle so that she survived. She remembered hearing that story from both Dora and Molly Weasley and being so surprised she made them put the memories into a Pensieve to watch them. She wasn't happy that the man had found happiness away from Narcissa, but then again, she knew her sister. "She needs a general healing draught, a class-three nutritive potion and bruise paste. Follow that with one week of class-two nutritive potions at breakfast for one week, then two weeks of a class-one, she should be fully recovered after that. I've already cast the primary healing spells, and I will come check on her tomorrow afternoon."

"Very good, Healer. I appreciate your time more than you know," Lucius said over his shoulder as he entered the Floo. "Malfoy Manor!"

Hermione and Severus had listened to the list of things the girl needed and headed off to get them. "Severus, I will get the healing draught and bruise paste from the infirmary. Do you have the nutritive potions?"

"Yes, they are in my quarters. I never know which students will require some at the beginning of the school year. I will meet you at Malfoy Manor," he said as he walked off.

Harry laughed bitterly. "Why couldn't Albus have been half so conscientious about his students?"

"Because it didn't meet his plans, Harry. You couldn't be healthy and strong. You wouldn't have been willing to throw yourself under a bus if you had been." Hermione's voice was full of rancor. "I will see you all at Malfoy Manor." She hurried off to the infirmary.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 8

Hermione and Celeste bond.

Malfoy Manor was a hive of activity when Hermione arrived, holding the potions she had taken from the hospital wing. She glanced around the room quickly, seeing where Severus was and taking the potions over to him.

"Ah, you've arrived, Hermione. Would you give Miss Malfoy the first set of doses while I go ascertain what has become of Draco? He had offered to assist, but appears to have vanished," said Severus, a worry line prominent in his forehead.

Hermione nodded at him. She knew better than to say anything when he had that look on his face. She turned to the little girl on the chaise lounge. "Hello again, Celeste. I see someone has helped get your hair back to normal, and the bruises and scars are almost gone! You certainly are a beautiful girl."

"Thank you, Miss. But Mama always said good looks are only icing. It is what is inside that matters. Headmaster Snape is more striking than handsome, but he seems like a very good man," replied the girl.

"Out of the mouths of babes, of course. You and your mama are absolutely correct. I didn't know if Lucius had anything ready yet to keep you busy, so I brought a few things with me." She reached into her small beaded bag and pulled out a rather large book. "This is *Hogwarts: A History*, a limited edition that is complete and self-updating. It is one of my absolute favorite books. I swear I find new things in it every time I open it, and I don't mean the newest items, either." Hermione smiled when her statement elicited a giggle from Celeste. She continued to talk while she pulled more things out of her bag. "This is a rune puzzle, a basic one; they are fun if you like adventure sort of games. Here is a sketch pad and pencil, and then I have a book of word and letter puzzles. My mum loves those when she has to be still for a while."

"Oh!" exclaimed Celeste. "I didn't realize your mama was normal!" She saw the confused look on Hermione's face. "The magical books all move for puzzles. And you have a pencil with them, not a quill!"

Hermione winced when she realized all the magical people in the room heard the girl's loud exclamation. She moved to intercept Lucius, who looked ready to explode, when Harry's voice rang out.

"Normal is relative, little one. My aunt thought she was normal and my mother was a freak. Hermione's mother is not magical, but that doesn't make her any more or less normal than my mum, who was, do you understand?" Harry asked the girl gently as he squatted down by the side of the lounge.

Celeste had seen the stormy look on her father's face and had shrunk back into the lounge.

"But Mama always said I was special. I didn't mean anything bad, really, I didn't!"

Lucius knelt down by his daughter and stroked his hand down her hair, which was growing in nicely. "Dearest, I know you saw anger on my face, but I swear to you now that I would never harm you. I don't like pejoratives, even if they seem harmless. I caused much harm to many innocents in the name of someone who was very good at labeling others. Your aunt is not the definition of normal. A normal person does not harm a child, especially their own blood, even if they are different."

Celeste gazed very seriously at her father. Then she nodded. "OK, Papa. You did bad things because of what you called normal. But you don't do that now, right? Or you would not have loved Mama... I will try to explain what I mean better." She turned to Hermione. "My mama liked the word puzzles too; she said they were good to occupy and exercise the mind when the body was stuck."

Hermione smiled, a beautiful smile the little girl mirrored. "I do believe I would've liked your mama quite a bit. Now, what would you like to do first?"

"I want to see the book, Miss Hermione. You said it was your favorite, right?" Celeste looked imploringly at the woman she had felt an almost instant rapport with.

Hermione patted Lucius's arm and handed the child the book. She was pleased to see the girl dive right in. She moved away from the chaise lounge and toward a table at the side of the room that held some pastries and tea.

She startled a bit when Lucius stepped in very close behind her, running his large hands up her arms and settling them on her shoulders.

"You have my thanks and admiration for the way you are handling my daughter. She is lucky to have you as her champion," he said, low and only for her to hear.

Hermione turned in his arms. "You told her a bit about yourself, and she saw you were willing to be truthful. It was amazing to see you bonding like that. You are going to have some hiccups, but I do believe you will manage the situation quite well," she replied.

"I don't believe we are going to need half of the emergency measures you believed we would need to employ, Hermione."

"No, probably not, but we should still send out a statement to the press. They need to know that your marriage was unfortunately not a love match but that you never meant to hurt Narcissa. Explain that Celeste's existence was unexpected, but not unwelcome, and leave little hints that a girl is important to a family that does whatever it can to ensure an heir," responded Hermione.

"You may want to let Narcissa know what you are going to do. It will take the wind out of her sails. You remember how she would be, all fire and storm until she calmed down and thought a bit," said Severus, who had glided almost silently across the room to join the conversation.

Lucius had a rather feral grin on his face at the thought of what he would write to his erstwhile wife. "I do believe I will, Severus," he said, then turned and walked out of the sitting room.

Hermione sighed when she realized that on his way out he had detoured a bit and given his daughter a little bell to ring if she needed him.

"He is a doting father, Hermione; he always has been," said Severus, noting her response.

"It is amazing that he can live his life behind that mask he wears all the time when he obviously feels everything so deeply," she answered even though Severus hadn't verbalized his question. "It is easy to see what you have seen in him for so long. But it is also easy to see that he believes the world should fall at his feet when he so desires. It confuses me. How can you want to snog someone silly yet make them stand in a corner for their bad behavior at the same time?"

Severus nodded absently, his thoughts whirling.

"I need to speak to you, though, alone. Maybe when we return to Hogwarts?" Hermione asked, not realizing she had just caused Severus's whirling thoughts to cause a whirlwind in his stomach.

She must not want the both of us anymore. But she did not say that... I will have to see. Jumping to conclusions is not going to help me defend my position.

"Don't look like that, Severus. It isn't anything bad. I promise."

"I didn't realize I was giving myself away, love. You will have to explain how you saw my discomfiture. Shall we return to Hogwarts? Everything seems well in hand here, and there won't be any talking to Lucius until he is done with whatever diabolical scheme he has in mind with that letter he is writing," responded Severus, oddly comforted that she could read him so well.

Hermione caught Harry's eye and walked over to him. "Harry, could you please let all the Malfoys know that we didn't want to be underfoot any longer, but if they need either me or Severus, we will be back at Hogwarts?" she asked.

"No problem, 'Mione. Although, I think Lucius may be running over there if he thinks he's being left out of anything," Harry cautioned.

"He won't be. But I need to speak to Severus, and there are a few things we need to finish up before school starts... If he says anything, tell him he's welcome to stay with me if he wishes. I don't really have a place here yet, and I know Severus isn't going to stay here and send me home... I mean Hogwarts," she stuttered, realizing she just called the castle home.

"Don't worry, I thought of it as home for a very long time, you know." Harry smiled knowingly.

Hermione swatted him on the arm affectionately, then walked toward the Floo. Severus, who had spoken to Draco, joined her, and they went back to the castle together.

While Severus and Hermione returned to the castle, Lucius had gone into his study and sat at the desk. He knew that what he was going to write was going to devastate Narcissa. Unfortunately for her, the time when he would have felt the smallest pang of regret was long past.

My dear Narcissa,

Many things are going to be revealed or hinted at in the papers shortly. I know you to be above petty jealousies, but it is always better to have all the information before being required to answer any questions.

Celeste is my daughter, yes. Born of a love-match between her mother and I. Before you burn this, I am not trying to hurt you. I did not realize I had fallen in love with Belinda Bonaventura until she bore me a daughter. Malfoy girls are only born when their parents are in love. All those years ago, when Calliope was born and you thought I was so attentive because I wanted a boy instead? You were wrong. You pulled away from me after she died, only allowing me near you a few days a month. You never asked me. I found out your beliefs from your insane sister, after you had destroyed any feeling I had for you with your affairs.

Regardless, that is the past. The present is getting my daughter ready for Hogwarts. I know you have always resented my relationship with Severus... but he has been the one constant in my life. The future, well, the future will hopefully see me as part of a triad with Severus and a willing witch. I wish you happiness in your future as well.

Sincerely,

Lucius

Lucius called his fastest owl and sent the letter off to Narcissa. He knew she was going to need some time to process everything he had told her. *My mother always said Narcissa would regret her cavalier treatment of me. I think she would've enjoyed that letter.*

He returned to the sitting room, finding Draco and Ginny entertaining the little girl with what looked like a rather wild game of transfiguration charades. Harry was sitting back, watching with a bemused look on his face.

Harry looked up when he saw movement, then stood up and walked over to Lucius. "Hermione and Severus returned to Hogwarts. Before you panic, she did say you were welcome to stay with her if you wished. I don't think she is entirely comfortable here yet."

"Thank you very much, Harry. I will make certain Celeste is sufficiently recovered, then see if she wishes to accompany me and Draco back to the castle," responded Lucius.

Chapter 7

Lucius is Lucius, but Hermione doesn't like it.

Severus exited the Floo and turned to hold his hand out for Hermione to take. As she took his hand while gracefully moving through the fireplace, he asked, "What was it you needed to speak to me about, Hermione?"

Hermione looked at him, ready to say something biting, then saw the uncertainty deep in his dark eyes. She took a deep breath. "How is it that you don't lose yourself in the, I don't know what to call it, *Malfoy*ness of it all? I was starting to feel overwhelmed just by being in that maelstrom they call a manor," she said rapidly.

Severus exhaled loudly until that moment he hadn't realized he had been holding his breath. "I would not worry about that, dearest. Lucius is not happy with someone who is easily subjugated. I'm quite certain he will want to parade us around if the triad works because it will set him apart yet again, but we can put a stop to that easily enough." He felt confident enough to walk Hermione over to the sofa, considering he hadn't let go of her hand. He sat back against the mound of pillows on the end and pulled Hermione into his lap.

Hermione laid her head on his chest and smiled. "You thought I just wanted him, didn't you?"

"I know better than to think that I would be the one a woman wanted over Lucius Malfoy, my dear."

"You would be wrong in this case. I do find him attractive, inappropriately so, but when I had imagined my future, it was you I was with... although I see the regard you both have for each other, and the history, and figured I had no chance whatsoever about having any sort of chance there. It is why I was so angry; you both present a challenge, but I do not believe I am capable of the impossible," she said to him in a quiet voice.

"This is why we really need a class on Wizarding Traditions. Did you know there are an average of three wizards born for every two witches? It is believed that is why triads used to be more widely accepted. But since that is not a 'normal' type of relationship in the Muggle world, it has fallen out of favor," responded Severus, knowing Hermione needed a distraction, and new knowledge was a great way to distract her.

"Let me guess. That information is in the books Irma gave me," she muttered.

"Well, yes. But you can ask us anything," Severus replied as he cuddled her close to his chest.

"You need not worry, Severus. I'm not going to rip her from your arms," grated out Lucius from between his teeth.

Hermione pushed away from Severus, alarmed by Lucius's tone of voice. "What's wrong? Didn't Harry give you my message?"

"He did. But I was not expecting to walk in on foreplay. I thought we had an agreement," Lucius growled.

The moment was broken when Severus laughed, a deep, from the belly, laugh that echoed off the walls of his office. "Dear Merlin, the look on your face! You aren't used to being the odd man out, are you, Lucius? Are you really angry at either one of us? Or at yourself?"

Lucius visibly deflated. "I'm not certain. I know Malfoy Manor is not Hermione's favorite place. I know there was a lot going on, what with Draco and Ginevra canoodling in the oddest places, Harry pining for his missing lovers, and Celeste, but I feel like I'm being isolated, and I don't like it!"

Hermione, who had stood up when Lucius was growling, looked at both men and said, "Follow me!" She walked over to the Floo, and throwing down the powder, called out, "Hermione Granger's quarters!"

Both men looked at each other and practically raced for the Floo. Hermione was quite amused when they actually tumbled out of the Floo in her living room, having knocked each other over trying to be the first through. When they had untangled themselves and stood up, she cast a cleaning charm at them.

"So, should I be flattered or annoyed that you are acting like imbecilic teenagers over me?" she asked. She had to grin when both men looked at each other and then looked at their feet, very much like castigated students.

"Hermione," they both said at the same time, then looked at each other. A lifetime of intimate interaction between the two men came into play, and Severus took a step back.

Lucius spoke, his voice smooth and silky. "I have never before had Severus be a true rival for any witch's affections. As much as he means to me, and I to him, we are still very competitive. It is easy to forget, through our history as much as through the loss of tradition, that we do not have to compete against each other for your hand; rather, that we should work together. Seeing your response to my home was disquieting. I have not forgotten your experiences there. They were part of what was the worst year of my life. I dislike a lack of control, and yet, as difficult as that is for me, I truly wish for you and Severus both to become a permanent part of my life... I see by your expression that you are finding my declaration premature and Gryffindorish. Life, even as long as it is for us wizards, is too short to be playing games. I have had far too much of politicking, even in my personal life. It is enough. You may no longer wish to allow my suit, but I couldn't leave this unsaid."

Hermione's eyes shone with unshed tears, but they weren't because she bought his story. She turned to look at Severus who had the most uncharacteristic gob-smacked look on his face.

"For Merlin's sake, Lucius, were you practicing that in front of the mirror in your study?" Severus demanded. "I have never heard such utter dreck!"

"Too much, you think?" Lucius responded. He was hoping to light a little fire under the witch. Then, turning to look at Hermione, he realized that for all his charm and skill with the fairer sex, he had grossly miscalculated.

Hermione's eyes were no longer shining. They were narrowed. "That is it! Out! I have had it with these little games you two play with each other. You remind me of two large cats with prey. I. AM. NOT. PREY! Severus, you have been the more honest of the two of you. If you wish to court me, you may. But I will not countenance a continued relationship with this strutting peacock! Let me know in the morning. I just can't deal with this any more."

"Hermione, love, we were j--"

"Just playing, Lucius, I know. But I don't have your thirty year history with each other. I don't like it. I have been the brunt of too many jokes, too many men who wanted me for reasons that had nothing to do with the heart. I refuse to be broken, and you, you come too close to doing that to me too easily. I had thought we might have some time tonight, the three of us, to see how compatible we might be, if maybe, just maybe I could get past that frisson of fear that crept in along with the desire when you both come near. But now, all I want is to be alone, to mourn what could have been. Now, leave!" Hermione's voice broke on the last syllable, making both men want to comfort her.

Lucius looked back at Severus, expecting sympathy, and seeing none, not even a glimmer. He finally left, realizing his friend had made his choice, and it was not in Lucius's favor.

He trudged out, stunned by the recognition of his failure. *Belinda would have done the same. When did I lose my touch, when did I become a caricature?* He stopped in the hallway, seeing Draco and Ginny sneaking out to the Quidditch pitch, brooms in hand, giggling madly. He cleared his throat, catching their attention.

"Oh, hello again, Mr. Malfoy!" Ginny practically sang.

"Did you screw up again, Father? Hermione is not going to handle your little mind games very well," reminded Draco.

"You just left? Really? You didn't tell her why you were being such an arse?" Ginny was astounded.

"How did you come to the conclusion that I was behaving badly, Miss Weasley?" Lucius inquired darkly.

"You had to be. Hermione was taking a big chance with herself and her fears when she was willing to try being with both of you. After the way she was treated by Scabior and a couple of the other Snatchers, well, too many people coming near her at once, and she doesn't handle it well. I was hoping... Never mind. I'm sure your Slytherin games of one-upmanship are more important to you than Hermione's feelings. I know you said you wanted a true triad, but you really just wanted something to hold over Mrs. Malfoy, right?" Ginny was being deliberately provocative, as she had seen Hermione's door open.

"You do not have any right to question me, girl. But I DO want a true triad. Hermione is the only witch I've ever met who could remotely handle being with me and Severus together. She always presents herself so strongly, I did not know that I was frightening her. She also resents the history I have with Severus, and there is nothing I can do about that!" Lucius roared. He was not pleasant when thwarted, even less so when he had basically thwarted himself.

Ginny was not happy with being yelled at, so she hit him with her strongest Bat-Bogey Hex. When Draco raised his wand to cancel the spell, Ginny just shrugged at him and started toward the Great Doors, instead of the Quidditch pitch.

"Sorry, Father," said Draco, then dropped his arm, and chased after the little red-head instead of helping Lucius.

A bloody Weasley in the family? At least she isn't going to bow in the face of adversity. Lucius wasn't certain what worried him more, his children or his love life.

Hermione stalked out of her quarters, her face scrubbed as though she had washed it recently, and backed Lucius into a wall, ignoring the flying bogeys. "If you wanted to really give this a chance, WHY THE BLOODY HELL DID YOU GIVE ME THAT SOB STORY?"

"Glu, don't you, glu, want to rid me of, glu, these first?" he choked out.

Hermione just shook her head.

"I believe what the witch wants to know is how you expect her to trust you at all. I tried to explain that you dislike not knowing the outcome of something and were just trying to bypass all the 'getting to know you' stage, but as you see, she still isn't happy with you," Severus said as he wrapped his arms around Hermione from behind.

Lucius almost choked to death when he saw Hermione turn her head up for a kiss.

He visibly brought himself under control, then pleaded, through the bogeys, for either one to release him.

"If I do, will you let me cast a truth-spell on you before you enter my quarters?" Hermione asked.

Lucius nodded his assent.

She silently cast the reversal for Ginny's hex. She was quite surprised when Lucius walked to her and knelt at her feet. She looked back at Severus, who nodded.

She raised her wand and cast silently again. He rose gracefully to his feet and followed her and Severus back into her rooms. He raised his eyebrows when he was directed to the sofa, and she sat in Severus's lap in the big chair across from it.

"I know Severus had no idea what you were going to say when you spoke earlier. Why did you decide to play with me like that?"

"Insecurity," responded Lucius, glowing blue when he spoke, proving she had cast the spell she said she would.

"Excuse me? Except for a short stint in Azkaban and that horrible year which none of us should have lived through, you've led a charmed life; what do you have to be insecure about?" Hermione was incredulous.

"Narcissa and I had an arranged marriage. I had fallen in love with her, she bore me a girl child who died shortly after her birth, but she did not understand that my attentiveness was due to love, and not because I needed an heir. She broke my heart. Then Belinda, well, you heard that story. I don't even know what I did to earn her heart; I was only looking for someone to bed. And you, well, you are attractive, intelligent, and quite willing to consider both my and Severus's suits, even overcoming your trepidation to consider us together. I know you prefer him, though, and I thought a grand declaration would win you over. It was stupid and badly planned," he responded.

"You are no longer under the spell, it only required the first honest answer," she said, surprised that he had explained.

Lucius stood and walked the three steps over to the chair Hermione and Severus were sitting in and again knelt down. He raised his hand and took one of hers. "I did not know that you were afraid of being approached by the two of us intimately. I am honored that you would have even considered it; most witches would not. I am again reminded how singular you are. Please, give me another chance," he pleaded.

Hermione was startled when he glowed blue.

"You didn't think I was going to let him give you another speech to drive you away, did you?" grumbled Severus.

Hermione laughed up at him, the affection in her eyes again fueling Lucius's insecurity. She turned back toward the blond on the floor. "This is it, Lucius. I won't be trifled with. My heart and feelings are not for sale or given to the one with the best sob story. If this doesn't work as a triad, Severus already knows he has won. Can you live with that?"

Lucius saw the determination in her eyes. He did not want to lose the chance to be a part of her life, due to his own ego and insecurities. "I will try."

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 8

The story ends.

After he said he would try, Lucius returned to his manor, lost in thought. *I don't believe this will be as easy as I believed... I will need to think about whether I really only want the witch sexually or truly do want the triad, as I told Severus. In any case, I need to rethink my position of control and power, as it appears I have very little. Ah, well, that was part of the fun with Belinda.*

After the door closed behind Lucius, Hermione turned to Severus. "That was difficult, Severus. I want him so badly, the two of you, the way my most wicked fantasies have kept me up at night, but I cannot be subject to his whims. I need the time to research... Yes, I know you said I could ask, but that is not me, you understand?"

Severus chuckled. "I know, dearest. Yes, I've realized once you are aware of who is approaching you, your nervousness turns to arousal, but you have seemed not to be yourself. Thank you for trusting me to help you. That means more to me than you know."

Hermione looked worried. "It won't affect your relationship with Lucius, will it?"

"As many times as that man has put me off for his witch of the moment, it is a suitably Slytherin payback. Truly, I want you, Hermione, I want a future with you. I would like it to include Lucius, but if it cannot, then he and I will be friends, or more, away from you, and with your knowledge. I will not jeopardize that because Lucius cannot bend," Severus stated emphatically. "The thought of both of us caressing you, entering you, well, as you can see, that is most certainly part of *my* fantasies," he said, waving his hand at the front of his trousers.

In a lilting voice, with a small grin on her face and a raised eyebrow, Hermione responded, "I would help you with that, but I did make a promise that until a decision was made, all play time would include the three of us... I like to keep my word."

"I won't horrify you by taking care of this now," said Severus, as he walked toward the Floo, threw in the powder and headed to his quarters.

Hermione watched his dramatic exit with a sigh, then fanned herself. "I wouldn't have been horrified!" she called out to the departing wizard, certain he had not heard her.

"Bloody hell, witch, you should keep your comments to yourself. You aren't making this any easier," Severus muttered under his breath.

"What are you talking about, Severus?" asked Lucius, who had decided against returning home, and hoped that Hermione would keep her word about any sexual encounters.

"This! And that impossible little witch told me she wouldn't have minded watching me take care of it!" he exclaimed while gesturing to his rather tented trousers.

Lucius smiled. "Neither would I, but since it appears she is keeping her word about both of us, I will refrain. Do you wish me to leave?"

"No, just wait there. You obviously have something to say," Severus commanded, then stalked off to his private restroom.

Shortly thereafter, he returned. "What did you need, Lucius?"

"Where did I go wrong, Severus? Why was just being Lucius Malfoy not enough? I don't understand... I am glad to have Celeste in my life, but everything has unraveled and I cannot seem to find my way. I dislike this uncertainty," stated Lucius.

"Did you ever think that Hermione Granger would be swayed or wooed *just* because you are Lucius Malfoy? Was Belinda? Or did you have to prove that you really did have a heart and a conscience and some humility?" questioned Severus.

"I see. But is she still attracted to me, Severus? Because even if I need time to convince her of my sincerity of feeling for her, sex would be *nice*."

Severus laughed. "Interesting choice of word. After her little comment this evening, I doubt nice is going to be part of the equation. For Merlin's sake, she said she would enjoy watching me wank! That is not the purview of nice," he responded.

Lucius glared at Severus for his deliberate misinterpretation. "Fine, fine. I will go home and see if she is amenable to a nice dinner tomorrow."

"No."

"What?"

"I said, no, Lucius. Give her a few days to research triads. Let her find out just what kind of power she will hold. Part of her anger was very real. She resents that you were trying to get her to agree to things without letting her have some time to understand what she was doing. There has been no time for her to look into it. Give her some," said Severus. "I certainly do not want a rehash of this farce we've had so far."

Lucius, taken aback by Severus's emphatic rejection of his plan, was flabbergasted. "This is what you meant, isn't it? I want the witch, but if I get her on my terms, there is no basis for the true triad I promised you." He sighed. "Very well. I will send her an owl asking if she is willing to dine with us in ten days... I will be able to get to know my daughter better, and Hermione will have a chance to do her beloved research."

Severus smiled his acceptance of this more moderate plan.

"Don't think I will leave her to her own devices for ten days, though, Severus. I want her to want us as badly as we want her. I am planning some trinkets and letters, and books...oh yes, books," Lucius said, almost to himself as he headed for the Floo.

The next morning, Hermione received an owl from Lucius, requesting her presence at a dinner ten days hence. She sent the owl back, full of bacon and some of her coffee, oddly, with a positive response. She settled down to read. Four hours into her reading, she sent an owl with a letter to Luna. She sat down to read some more.

"Hi, Hermione!" Luna's cheerful voice sounded from her fireplace.

"Luna! Come through, please!" cried out Hermione, seeing her friend's face flickering in the flames.

Luna stepped through, wearing a cheerful sundress. The two hugged, then sat on Hermione's sofa.

"How far did you get in your reading?" Luna asked.

"Quite far. I've read the true story of Camelot, and the history of marriages and triads, and even part of the biology behind the whole thing. I see why Lucius was being so pushy. He didn't want me to find out that the witch pretty much controls the whole set up. I'm trying to decide whether to still be angry or not," said Hermione.

"He was being himself. Would you be half as attracted if you knew he would bend to your every whim, or do you like that he will challenge you?" asked Luna wisely.

"No, it was more of a turn-on actually. That man makes me crazy and hot for him."

Luna burst into giggles. "I'm picturing him with the headmaster, all light and dark, and it is a very appealing picture. More so with you in the middle. You know, you might want to tease them a bit, send them little questions about your reading. Use these ten days to have them as mad for you as you are for them," she told Hermione.

"Oooh, I like that idea. You are the best, Luna!" exclaimed Hermione. "I would love to see you and Harry and Viktor together... Not like that, you naughty thing! Can we do dinner some night this week?"

Once Luna recovered from her giggles and ascertained that Hermione truly was not asking to be a voyeur, although she had quite a bit of fun doing so, they decided to meet for dinner in London a few days later.

Hermione sent a quick note to Lucius and Severus, asking if they meant to take turns with her... making both men grit their teeth at their wait. Her next few notes were just as provocative.

Severus got a small bit of revenge by casting a spell on her at dinner in the Great Hall, a voice whispering, at rather inappropriate intervals, what he would like to do to her just at that moment.

Lucius, after three days, sent her an ancient copy of a first edition wizarding triad moving-picture sex-position book. Hermione called it the wizarding *Kama Sutra* since the book had no title of its own. She spent the rest of that day in her shower.

Dinner with Luna, Viktor and Harry was enlightening. The boys were very into each other, but they doted on Luna. It was subtle, but Hermione knew them very well. "Thank you for allowing me a peek into your lives," she said after dinner.

"Did it help, 'Mione?" asked Harry.

"Yes. Now that I've done most of my research, I think I may ask them over for tea tomorrow," replied Hermione.

"Good for you!" exclaimed Luna. "I'm guessing you are all a bit riled by now."

"Very much so," said Hermione.

She went home and sent out owls to both men, asking them to tea the next afternoon.

Promptly at 3PM both Severus and Lucius walked through her Floo.

"I'm so glad you could make it," said Hermione, who was wearing a figure-flattering sun dress in a rose color.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world, Hermione," responded Lucius.

"I've missed you," said Severus. "I know I've seen you every day, but I miss the more intimate interactions. I had not realized how much our friendship mattered to me."

That statement garnered him an armful of witch. "Thank you, Severus. I am glad to know that I was missed."

"Hrrumph."

"Oh, don't worry, Lucius. I missed you as well. I'm certain I'm out of practice trying to figure out your very Slytherin point of view," she said, making the taciturn man smile. "I have the tea ready. There are sandwiches and biscuits. Would you like me to pour?" she asked.

Both men nodded, so Hermione poured out the tea for each of them, and they settled on the sofa with Hermione between her two wizards.

"Were you able to complete your research?" asked Lucius, placing his hand on her knee after he had set his cup aside.

Hermione leaned toward him, moving her other leg toward Severus on the sofa. "Yes, and there was quite a bit you seemed to want to keep from me." She put her hand to his lips when it looked like he was about to speak. "Hush. It is not a criticism, not now. I know what your control means to you, but you do know a true triad is not going to give you that, even if we decide to present it that way to the greater world, the way Harry, Luna and Viktor do."

In the meanwhile, Severus was kneading her feet. He had pulled both into his lap.

"Oh, that feels good, Severus," she said, stretching a bit and throwing her head back.

Lucius took advantage of that and kissed her neck while Severus moved his hands slowly higher.

Hermione writhed under their attention for a bit, then pulled back. "I would rather not have our first time be on my sofa, please."

Both men were breathing hard. "Very well, love, we will wait, but we can do other things," said Lucius.

"Like what, Lucius? Discuss those books you sent me?" breathed Hermione.

"Did any of those books interest you, love?"

"I particularly liked the one with no name, Lucius... One of those scenes appeared to be in the Headmaster's office here at Hogwarts," said Hermione, her thighs starting to get moist from her arousal. She wriggled a bit, trying to get comfortable.

Severus, in the meanwhile, had begun to rub circles on her arms, pulling her back against him, kissing her neck.

When Lucius saw Hermione nod, he ran his hands up her thighs. "You naughty girl, you aren't wearing underthings," he said as he rubbed his hand over her mound.

"Naughty? Aren't I a bit old to be naughty?" Hermione asked breathlessly, remembering that she had said the same thing to Luna earlier in the week. Severus had moved his hands to her breasts and was systematically squeezing them, then pinching her nipples, while rubbing his rather significant erection against her bum.

"You are never too old to be naughty, my dear," Lucius responded while pulling her dress up over her head, leaving her nude between the two clothed men.

Hermione realized naughty might just be the word when she responded passionately to the two clothed wizards. "Gentlemen, I still don't want our first time to be on my sofa!"

Severus got a rather feral grin on his face. "What was that photograph in the Head's office depicting?" he asked.

Hermione caught her breath. Both men enjoyed watching her breasts heave when she did that. "One of the men had the woman bent over the desk and was pounding into her while she was sucking the other's cock," she replied.

Lucius ran a finger over her lips, then gasped when she sucked it into her mouth.

Severus saw that, then asked, "Would you like to recreate it?"

Hermione was surprised when Lucius threw his head back and laughed.

"Why is that funny?" she asked.

"It is a punishment for Albus. He was unfortunately impotent when his portrait was painted. I can lock him into his portrait and force him to watch. When I release him, he is forced to find the nearest portrait with a cold body of water and cool himself off," Severus replied cautiously, afraid he had ruined the moment.

Both men were surprised when the little witch responded with a vicious grin of her own. "Let's."

That was all Severus needed. He Apparated the three of them straight to his office, where many of their fantasies were fulfilled.

Albus spent most of the next school year soaking wet, in one portrait or another.