

Mission Impossible: Returning Acceptance to the Malfoy Name

by karelia

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Chapter 1 of 1

Muggle culture has become a trend in the wizarding world after the war. Hermione is right at home there.

Ron looked up briefly when Hermione entered their flat in an alley off Hampstead High Street. "You're late today. Did Snape make you work late?"

Hermione laughed as she bent down to peck his cheek. "No. He may be still as caustic as ever, but he's a lot fairer these days. Sometimes I can almost believe he's human."

On Ron's snort, she continued. "Actually, Astoria Greengrass caught me on my way out, and we had coffee together. She wants me to join the *Committee of Widows and Orphans*." Hermione sat down opposite Ron, who was occupying most of the sofa with a lot of mail. "Ah. Sorting fan mail again, I see." There had been a time she'd found Ron's almost religious devotion to fan letters amusing. Her indulgent smile quickly diminished when realisation hit that his fan post was more important than looking at her.

"And of course you accepted." Ron still didn't bother to look up from sorting through the letters, adding most to a growing pile to his right, occasionally slinging one towards the end of the sofa to his left.

Hermione sighed. "I did. It's a good cause and not much effort on my part. Astoria gave her word that she won't make me attend Ministry events." The silence that followed, occasionally interrupted by the shuffling of paper, became increasingly uncomfortable.

Eventually, Hermione spoke again. "I bought tickets for the symphony. They're playing the..." She stopped abruptly, seeing Ron's grimace.

"I know it's all the rage," Ron said, sounding impatient. He rose from the sofa.

"Well, I've enjoyed classical music since my childhood, and I'm not prone to fall slave to trends. Honestly, most of these wizards and witches flocking to the concert halls these days have no clue about music. They just want to see and be seen. It's disrespectful of the art form if you ask me."

Ron shoved his hand in his pocket and hunched his shoulders. "The thing is, I don't really appreciate this art either. To be honest, I think most art is boring." He took his hands out of his pockets and opened them, and for the first time since her arrival, his eyes met hers for longer than a split second.

Hermione stared at him in sadness, knowing that must have taken all his courage to say. She sighed and slipped the tickets back into her pocket.

"Hermione..."

She met his eyes again. "It's not working, is it?"

Ron shook his head. "No. You're right. I will always love you, and I don't doubt you feel the same way, but..."

"But we've grown apart. Our interests have developed into very different directions. I know, Ron."

He nodded and embraced her. "Friends?"

"Always." Hermione almost sighed with relief. She loved Ron with all her heart, but her future suddenly looked brighter than it had in months. *Young, free, and single*, she thought. *That's the ticket.*

Severus Apparated into a short cul-de-sac a few streets away from his mother's still Secret-Kept home in Burley in the New Forest.

He'd given up trying to convince her to release the spell, even though hardly anyone from the wizarding world lived in the village that amongst Muggles was famous for being inhabited by witches.

"I like my life this way, Sev," Eileen had told him. "Instead of following someone else's terms, now everything happens on my own terms." She took a slight pause and then smiled. "If it pleases you, I gave Minerva my address, and she's been visiting every other Saturday for a chat and tea. And Augusta visits regularly, too."

When the house became visible, Severus stepped towards the door and knocked. "It's me, Severus."

The door opened to reveal a tall, slender, elderly woman with black hair tied in a bun at the back, some locks loosened and sticking out here and there, which softened her severe features. "Come in." She held out her arms, and Severus stepped into the embrace. It had taken him a while to accept his mother finding him worthy of physical contact, but he'd soon begun to find comfort in the little gestures and more recently returned them as easily.

"How are you? Had a good week?" he asked.

"Oh, I did, thank you! You remember Augusta's grandson helping me set up the garden earlier in the year? Well, I've been harvesting all sorts of herbs, vegetables, and potions ingredients since last Sunday, about a month earlier than usual, and the plants are producing prolifically, thanks to his herbology skills. I'm having a ball!" They entered the kitchen, and she waved her wand to fill up the kettle. "Let me show you while we're waiting for the water to boil."

Severus duly admired all the herbs and flowers and branches drying in the shed before following his mother back to the kitchen. "If I need any local potion ingredients, I'll know where to come." Then his voice softened. "I'm so glad you're enjoying life again, Mother."

"I am, I am! Life is wonderful! Three years ago, when I received word that old Snape finally bit the dust, I would not have dreamed to be so well today." She smiled, then frowned. "I'm sorry. I should not speak about your father like that."

"No worries. It's not as if I ever liked him," Severus soothed her.

"But now," she'd finished the tea and handed him a mug, "tell me about how your week's been! Found a witch yet?" The hint of a grin quickly turned into a smile when he scowled.

"I enjoy living alone, thank you very much. Work is bearable, sometimes even enjoyable. Life in general..." He shrugged instead of saying more.

"I don't understand. The *Prophet* talks almost reverently about you every time you get a mention."

"Yes, yes, I'm now a respected wizard. That doesn't mean any one of them would cross the street to piss on me if I were on fire." He rolled his eyes.

Eileen took no notice. "But work is all right, eh? You don't miss teaching Potions?"

This time, the eye roll was blatantly directed at his mother. "Would you enjoy teaching dunderheads, or would you rather have a satisfying, interesting job with at least a half-decent colleague working at your side? Being recruited to the Department of Mysteries was the best thing that happened professionally."

"I know what you mean. But wasn't that half-decent colleague once one of your dunderheads?"

Now he knew she was teasing him. "Indeed. Actually, not so much a dunderhead than a know-it-all, but she seems to have grown out of that a bit."

Severus relished his tea. It was funny that his own tea never tasted the way his mother made it, even though they made it exactly the same way, including the one grain of rock salt for each mug barely a homeopathic amount, and yet it made all the difference between greasy-spoon tea and decent tea.

"Mother, how would you like to go for an evening at the opera? They're playing Tannhäuser at the Royal Opera House."

Eileen smiled wistfully. "Unless you're desperate for company, don't ask me to go out over an evening. There is nothing I enjoy more than coming back into the house from an afternoon puttering in the garden and sitting down in front of the fireplace with a good book. I know Muggle culture, at least the higher end of it, is all the craze in our world, but honestly. Maybe I'm just too old to be interested in something new." She pointed at the living room with its large fireplace. "This is where I love to be in the evenings. Why don't you ask your colleague? She's Muggle-born, isn't she? She'll probably appreciate it a lot more than I would, too. And besides, she don't seem to hate you."

Severus smirked at his mother's slight relapse towards the common language and then sighed inwardly. He'd hoped against hope Eileen would agree, and he realised it was foolish. Perhaps he would follow her advice and ask Granger. If she was bearable during the day, chances were she would make for adequate company during the evening as well. For now, though, he couldn't help making a stab at her words. "Did you know that books were once frowned upon by most wizards and only parchment was acceptable?" He looked pointedly at her collection of Shakespeare's works that took up most of the shelf nearest the fireplace and grinned almost boyishly when she scowled at him.

One, two, three, four, five, six. Turn on the spot where fringe meets carpet. One, two, three, four, five, six.

Lucius Malfoy paced in front of the fireplace in the drawing room. The carpet showed exactly how much he'd taken to this activity, but worn carpets were the least of his worries. He did not remember when the last letter had arrived, save for Draco's occasional correspondence when he was out of town.

The fireplace burned brightly day and night, but no one had called, let alone come through, in what seemed aeons.

He barely remembered the last time he'd had to tell some little minx that he only cared about his wife and then with great satisfaction how the beauty turned ugly or teary-eyed or put on the drama-queen act for having been spurned.

"Lucius."

He looked at the door and afforded his wife a small nod of acknowledgement, though it never occurred to him to smile.

Narcissa walked towards him and halted to block his continued pacing. "Lucius, please stop! It's not easy, *know*, but pacing day in, day out will do nothing to change it!"

"Cissy... I know that. But let me be. Please. I just don't know what to do anymore. I barely dare go out for fear of having rotten tomatoes thrown at me, and that's the more pleasant anticipation of possibilities." His eyes were pleading with her.

"I know, Lucius. But seeing you so despondent breaks my heart. Where is all that spirit of yours? You're a mere shell of your former self. Sometimes, I wish you still had the beliefs you shared with the Dark Lord; at least then you were a real being." Narcissa swallowed visibly. "I feel bad wishing for that, but nevertheless I do," she whispered.

"Oh, my love!" Lucius straightened and wrapped his arms around his wife. At least she did not resent him. Yet. He would die if she ever did. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?" She remained in his embrace, her head resting against his right shoulder.

Lucius pulled her head up by placing a finger under her chin. "You appear, and I feel instantly better. It's the kind of magic nobody can explain."

Narcissa smiled at him. "The Blacks are known for making one feel infinitely better or infinitely miserable. I suppose you're lucky." Her smile took on the barest hint of mischief. "And with that, I shall love you and leave you for a few hours."

Lucius was instantly alarmed. "Where are you going? It's dangerous out there, no matter where!"

Narcissa patted his arm. "The Muggles call it retail therapy. And I'm in dire need of it. I'll be careful, promise." She kissed him and walked out the front door to Disapparate, knowing that he would take up his pacing again the moment she'd turned her back..

Ophelia's Robes used to have a dubitable reputation simply because of its location: exactly at the corner where Diagon Alley met Knockturn Alley. However, anyone granted, mostly purebloods who'd ever experienced the skill of Ophelia's dressmaking would instantly silence anybody who dared speak against the witch. To think of Ophelia as a twilight character was simply ridiculous. The witch now in her early eighties had never been interested in anything but beautifying witches, and occasionally wizards, with a little help of shards of fabric, artfully cut and even more artfully sewn into shapes that brought out the very best of any human figure. The witch could probably improve the looks of a Blast-Ended Skrewt, too, if she tried.

Narcissa Apparated to an alley near The Leaky Cauldron and, after a short walk, entered the pub only to be instantly jeered at. Head high and ignoring the clientele, she walked through towards the wall that led to Diagon Alley, her wand held tightly in her right hand. Casting several protective spells around her, she tapped the bricks that allowed her entry to the wizarding quarter.

Within moments she wished for mere rotten tomatoes. Narcissa had managed barely eighty yards and already had to furiously renew every protective spell and add any she could think of. How she would make it to Ophelia's Robes within the next hour or so was anyone's guess. *Maybe Lucius was right. This is hopeless. I can't even shop anymore.*

"Mrs Malfoy. Allow me." Turning to the crowd, Mr Potter shouted, "Leave her alone!" The visitors to Diagon Alley instantly stopped. Potter offered his elbow, and she gratefully slipped her arm through.

"Where are you heading?" he asked, not taking his eyes off any potential attackers.

"To Ophelia's Robes." Shaken, her voice was barely a whisper until she straightened herself and managed in a near-normal voice, "And thank you so much, Mr Potter."

"Don't be silly. I owe you a life debt, even if you don't think so. This is the very least I can do. However, I cannot stay around to wait. I'm in the middle of an assignment. For Merlin's sake, put a Disillusionment Charm on yourself before you leave Ophelia's!" They'd reached Ophelia's by now, and Potter disappeared as fast as he'd appeared.

Narcissa entered the shop wondering why she hadn't thought of said Charm and was relieved when Ophelia greeted her like a long-lost friend.

For the next couple of hours, Narcissa forgot her troubles and entered into the dialogue of clothes design, fashion versus timeless elegance, and colours with wild abandon. When she left the shop, she did remember to cast a Disillusionment Charm as per Mr Potter's instructions.

Her higher than usual spirits lasted until she told her husband of her journey.

"You will not go out alone again! I forbid it!" Lucius's voice was thunderous.

"Calm down. Please, love. No harm was done after all. And Mr Potter is a real knight." Narcissa's attempt to soothe her husband did not go far; he soon took up his pacing again.

Just what can I do to help you? Every effort on my part has failed she thought and turned to leave for the living room. At least there, the despondent silence wasn't interrupted by annoyingly precise steps.

"Any conclusions about the latest UFO sighting yet?" Snape smirked, knowing the answer already.

Hermione obliged by sighing in response. A pause followed before she added, "Unless I take quantum science into account, I won't get anywhere. But it's not at the top of my priorities."

"Pray tell, what is at the top?"

She completely ignored his sardonic tone; it almost earned her admiration on his part. "You remember that Muggle ocean liner disappearing somewhere near Bermuda? It appeared suddenly in the Arctic Circle. All passengers seem to be fine. And the Muggle government wants our help in figuring out what happened." She held up a parchment, and he took it and instantly flung it on his desk.

"It can wait for now. What's more pressing this instant is a spare ticket for the Royal Opera tonight." He cast a questioning glance at her, an eyebrow raised.

"Interesting. I have a spare one for the London Symphony for Tuesday."

They exchanged tickets and read the details.

"You like Wagner. I should've guessed." Hermione grinned.

"Well. You like Shostakovich. I should've guessed." Snape smirked. "The question is: Do you like Wagner enough to sit through an entire opera?"

"I guess it's worth finding out," she answered.

She learned she did like Wagner, and after that, she discovered Khachaturian as well as any other composer Snape introduced her to. He soon shared her enthusiasm for Rachmaninoff and Schönberg.

Neither cared for Prokofiev.

Late spring with its many sunny days gave way to a summer that demanded a sizeable number of rain-repelling charms, and Hermione found she enjoyed the almost weekly visits to cultural events. No pressure, no pretence, and no relationship to constantly trip over just colleagues with a mutual interest, sharpening each other's minds in the process, and a shared appreciation for good music.

She particularly liked the way people made respectably wide circles around her when the former Potions professor was by her side. Not being bothered by gushing witches or stuttering wizards, journalists requesting interviews, or the parents of students asking for autographs was outright refreshing. Hermione had tried in the early days after the war, though mostly because Ron revelled in the attention, but she had figured out soon enough that she would never turn into a social butterfly. She was perfectly content with that knowledge.

Snape had never even attempted to be accommodating, though nobody dared complain; he was too high up on the ladder of War Heroes and not one iota of it self-styled. His long-standing reputation of being unapproachable did the rest.

"No, Narcissa, you will NOT go back to Diagon Alley! It is by far too dangerous!" Lucius did not interrupt his pacing as he shouted at his wife.

"Lucius, really!" Narcissa's voice sounded annoyed. "I ordered some badly needed robes, and *will* pick them up, come rain or shine or rotten tomatoes or curses."

He was almost surprised at the lack of foot stomping. "I will find Potter and make him take you there. You will NOT go alone!" he said and picked up a pinch of Floo powder.

"I know how to cast a Disillusionment Charm, you know," she said tartly into the empty room, but waited until Lucius returned alone. Ignoring his wish would only cause further arguments, which had been far too numerous lately.

"Potter will be here in about an hour and escort you," he said, not noticing the satisfied tone in his voice.

"I'll get ready, then," Narcissa said and left for the bedroom without further ado.

"Father." Draco's head appeared in the fireplace.

"Draco! Come through!" Lucius smiled at his son. He looked good and dressed well.

"Where is Mother?"

"Oh, she is getting ready to go to Ophelia's. Potter should be here in an hour or so; he agreed to escort her."

"That bad?" Draco frowned.

"You know I love your mother, Draco, but she's very foolish to think she can go out by herself these days. She was attacked the other day when she went shopping, and it was only thanks to Potter," he now spat the name, "that she made it out unharmed. Silly woman." He sighed deeply.

Draco laughed. "Oh, Father! Mother is stronger than any witch I've ever known. She'll get out of any situation, I have no doubt."

"I fear for her, Draco." The elder's shoulders slumped. "Yes, she is very strong. But our world despises the Malfoys. Except you, of course. Thank Merlin for that."

"Father... have you done anything about your situation? Surely, you're not expecting it to change while you're wearing out one carpet after another." Draco looked disdainfully at the thin patches of the rug in front of the fire. Elf-spun silk was a lot more hard-wearing than any Muggle-made material, but it didn't last forever either, and even the self-mending Charms faded over time or with hard use.

"I... I..." Lucius's shoulders dropped further.

"Father, at least talk to Severus. Please. Nothing will change unless you make an effort to change!" Draco urged.

Lucius's face lit up suddenly. "That, son, was the best idea you've had in ages! Now, let's go to the library and enjoy a drink while your mother isn't looking."

"Ah. Must be the Boss," Severus muttered and walked to the door to open it.

The Boss nobody knew the name of the head of the Unspeakables walked in and deposited a large stack of Muggle A4 paper on Hermione's desk, looking annoyed. "You could have warned me that these professional crime busters are idiots," he grumbled. "What does FBI stand for anyway? I keep forgetting."

"The official version is *Federal Bureau of Investigation*," Hermione said, "but rumour has it that it may stand for *Find Better Ideas* or *Fiercely Babbling Idiots*..."

"...Or *Females Blame Intuition* or even *Focus by Intoxication*," Snape added wryly. "I'm sure you get the idea... I suspect most of them have been subjected to the odd *Obliviate* at some stage, considering how often they ask us for help."

"Damn Muggle alphabet agencies," the Boss muttered, then turned his eyes from Snape's to Hermione's. "This," he pointed to the stack of paper, "is the documentation of the FBI's investigation in the cruise liner's disappearance. I skimmed through it and saw they essentially drugged everyone who claimed there is a passage of sorts from somewhere in the Bermudas to the North Pole with the heaviest of their *medications*. So, out of the 270 passengers, we have about 70 who are seriously scared, though unharmed, about fifty who didn't show any reaction to whatever drugs they administered and have blissfully forgotten the entire episode, and the rest who now appear to be half crippled and lacking memory." He sighed deeply. "And this, lady and gentleman, looks to be the *modus operandi* where Muggle *agencies* of importance are concerned. No wonder they need us to sort out their messes." He nodded at Hermione and then at Severus. "Make of it what you will. Good luck." The wizard was out of the door before Snape got his mind around a reply.

"Merlin," Hermione groaned. "I was so happy before he turned up. Did you see? Rattle is coming to London with the Berlin Philharmonic! I just hope there'll be some tickets left by the time I get home. Looks like it's going to be a long workday."

"Rattle, you say? Colour me impressed," Snape answered. "Actually, I may have to go to Southbank at lunch."

"Really? Shouldn't we start with checking out those 70 undrugged people and convince them to tell us what they saw without unduly harming them?" Hermione asked doubtfully.

Snape smirked. "Can you imagine me questioning some unsuspecting American Muggle without them being harmed forever? You're so much better at that."

"I hate you," Hermione said without bite and started to look through the massive pile of Muggle reports, jotting down notes as she speed-read across each page.

Snape sighed dramatically. "Story of my life. Look, I'll secure tickets. You go visit those Muggles, as many as you can in a day and take tomorrow morning off since you'll likely work late."

Hermione looked thoughtful for a moment. "All right. And you pay for my ticket." She cast a beatific smile at him and returned to reading the blasted report that consisted mostly of incomprehensible accounts of an invisible portal, travelling in a strange tunnel under water, and the type and amount of drug administered. At one o'clock, she

took a quick lunch in the canteen; then, she Apparated to New York City for her first interview of a cruise passenger.

Severus's thoughts wandered briefly to Hermione as he looked at his clock above the mantel. Eight o'clock. He poured himself a gin and tonic, wondering where in the US she might be at that moment. Probably already on the West Coast, enjoying either California sunshine or Pacific rain. His deed was done. He had secured excellent tickets. Granger would be impressed.

His thoughts were interrupted by the fire flaring green.

"Severus?"

"Lucius! Come through!"

Lucius stepped into the room, dusting the imaginary soot off his robes, and looked around. "Life has changed for you. Looks nice."

"Well, I couldn't always keep to the dusty, mouldy, *Dark...*" Severus drawled. "Drink?"

"Please."

Severus mixed another gin and tonic and handed it to his old friend. "What are you up to these days? I never get to see you!"

"Thanks." Lucius took a long sip, nearly emptying the glass. "I'm... I'm up to nothing. It's awful. I've turned into a control freak. Cissy went out the other day and was attacked by all and sundry until Potter came to the rescue..."

"Ah, yes, good old Potter. He's a star, isn't he?"

The sardonic note in Snape's voice escaped Lucius entirely. "He is. He rescued my wife from being stoned. Literally." Lucius frowned at his friend. "Is it such a bad thing that I feel protective?"

"No," Severus hurried to say. "Not at all. But Cissy is a witch who knows how to defend herself, so grant her that."

"Yes. She truly is. But I cannot bear the thought of losing her to a mob of mad wizards and witches, so I didn't allow her to leave the house until I tracked down Potter to accompany her. She is not a happy witch."

"Frankly, I don't blame her," Severus offered. "Not many ever managed to fool the Dark Lord, and she certainly contributed to his downfall."

Lucius rolled his eyes. "You're not much help, my friend."

"Do you want a friend, or do you want a sycophant?" Severus asked.

Lucius slumped deeper into the sofa. "A friend, thank you."

"Let her judge her safety and be prepared to be called to the rescue," Severus suggested.

A hollow laugh was his answer. "How on earth could *I*, the most unwanted, hated wizard in England, rescue her? Severus, honestly!"

Severus scowled at his friend. "By going there and confirming your status as her husband. Now, you need to get out and be seen so people no longer feel frightened of the Malfoys; that's what you need to do, both of you."

"How do I do that *and* survive to tell the tale?" Lucius asked.

"Go to Muggle events, such as operas or concerts," Severus returned.

"Oh, wonderful. How is that going to help?"

"Nobody from our world would dare cast hexes when there are Muggles around. You will be seen regularly. People will soon lose interest in you. You and Cissy may even find you'll enjoy music. In any case, you came to ask for help. I'm offering it. Take it or leave it."

Lucius's eyes sought Severus's. "I'll take it."

Severus held up his two coveted tickets; he would have to venture out to one of the all-night Internet cafés to buy new ones. Waiting until the next day was too risky. "Berlin Philharmonic. It's one of *the* events in the Muggle cultural community and will probably draw a fair amount of wizards and witches as well. Now, leave me alone." Severus pointed to the fireplace. "Floo powder is on the mantle."

"You wouldn't have a third ticket? For Draco?" Lucius asked. "... I just would feel more comfortable if he's with us, too."

"I do not. *And* I have to procure another two tickets for myself. If it's not sold out yet, I'll get one for Draco."

"Severus... Is there any chance that we could get tickets and sit all together?" Lucius asked hesitantly.

Severus let out a deep sigh. "Give me the tickets back. I'll see what I can do. I will NOT, however, use magic, if that's your way of thinking. Tickets may be overpriced, but orchestras need to be fed, and Muggles rely heavily on dosh." He looked pointedly at the fireplace.

"Ever the good friend. Appreciate it," Lucius muttered as he scraped some Floo powder and threw it into the fire to return to Malfoy Manor.

Who on earth would knock on her door at 6.30 in the morning? Hermione rose, groggy, cast a detection Charm, then opened the door.

"Er, sorry if I woke you," Snape said awkwardly, "but it's a sort of emergency."

"The kitchen is that way..." Hermione pointed "...and please let there be coffee by the time I get out of the shower, or else don't expect me to be human," she continued. "Like, three cups for me at least." She hurried to the bathroom.

"Okay. What's the problem?" Hermione turned up in the kitchen showered and dressed, poured a mug of coffee, and inhaled deeply. "Thanks for that."

"Who said there was a problem?" Snape asked, his long fingers caressing his coffee mug.

"If all you wanted was coffee, you could have said so."

She'd grown on him, he had to admit. "Would you," he started slowly, "care to accompany not just me but also the Malfoys to the Berlin Philharmonic?"

Hermione frowned. "You still speak with Malfoy?" Her tone was frosty.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Granger, use that famous brain of yours!" The girl was daft at times, he thought before realising that she couldn't possibly know this part of his past. "They were my friends before you were even born. You know what your life was like before Potter rid our world of the Dark Lord. You were an outcast. That's what the Malfoys are now, except they only know how to live the lives of the privileged. Draco is all right because Potter accepts him the way he is, and Potter's word is god's, and besides, the younger generation is far more forgiving where their peers are concerned, but his parents are an entirely different story." His voice quietened when he continued. "It is because of Narcissa that I was not a complete outcast when I started at Hogwarts. For some reason, she took a liking to me shortly after I arrived, and at least all the Slytherins in my year accepted me. I would hate to see the Malfoys die as accidental victims of the last war because our world still needed a scapegoat, and everyone more suitable for the position is either dead or in Azkaban."

Hermione didn't answer for a while. Then, hesitantly and with a quiet voice, she said, "Mr Malfoy is no friend of mine. Mrs Malfoy may have earned a good thought or two in the battle, and yes, I know about Harry's life debt to her and that she doesn't agree because he saved Draco from the Fiendfyre, and Draco is just... well, Draco, but don't expect me to greet Lucius with any enthusiasm." She took a deep breath. "How did you manage to get tickets for five people at such short notice?"

He shrugged. "Nothing a bit of knowledge of the Internet and a Muggle bank card couldn't solve."

"You booked tickets on the Internet?" She could not quite get her head around the vision of Snape sitting in an Internet café amongst Muggles. Or, Merlin forbid, have a computer at home, electricity and broadband and the whole gamut. A sigh escaped her.

"Granger." The pleading tone of his voice irritated her.

"For fuck's sake. Stop calling me Granger!"

"Hermione..." Now his voice was utterly devoid of any irritant.

"Yes?" Her eyes met his, but he looked away almost instantly.

"Never mind." Now he sounded rough. "I'll see you at work later on. Take your time. You must have sleep to catch up after yesterday."

Fine! "All right." *Oh, Merlin, what have I just let myself into???* Hermione was tired, but knew sleep would escape her now; panic was threatening to take over. *Luna! I will ask Luna if she covers the event. I bet she will, since it's probably the biggest cultural Muggle event in London this year. Maybe she'll agree to make the Malfoys look somewhat better than outcasts... Not that I give a toss, but Snape went out of his way already to help them, so it's probably for the best...* She made a note to contact Luna later in the day. Then her thoughts turned to her wardrobe. *Fuck. I have nothing to wear!* She'd be damned if she looked like a frumpy, plain witch next to Mrs Bloody The-Smell-Here-is-Awful Malfoy.

Hermione wandered into the office a while after lunchtime.

"How did it go yesterday?" Snape asked casually, as if the early-morning meeting hadn't taken place.

"It... went. New York was scorching hot, Alabama and Iowa were drowning, Colorado had thunderstorms, the West Coast ranged from way too hot to typical English weather of rain and wind, and people were much too polite and politically correct to be of much use." Hermione offered a non-committal smile.

"Ah, yes. The Americans are known for their political correctness. One reason I try to stay away." Snape smirked. "Did you at least get anywhere, or did you merely learn the polite terms for plain descriptions?"

"Oh, I think I collected some useful statements," Hermione replied. "And if any Muggle government asks us again for assistance, I think the best route to go will be to Oblivate all FBI agents involved before they take action. It'll save a lot of trouble for all involved."

"I like your way of thinking," Snape said and sat down to take a look at her notes.

Hermione went to her desk to look at the incoming post that had accumulated since the previous day. She was grateful that no new assignment had arrived besides the usual handful of UFO sightings, about which the Muggle governments appeared as clueless as they did about the Bermuda mystery. The cruise liner project was likely to take more than passengers' statements to resolve.

"So, what is your conclusion in this?" Snape asked after a while. He'd risen from his chair and paced the length of the office.

"I'm not sure I have a conclusion yet as such," Hermione started. "I managed to speak to twenty-odd passengers out of the lot that escaped any drugging from the officials. The one thing *everyone* pointed out was a distinct lack of panic. Some said it felt like they suddenly went through an invisible door, ending up in a tunnel-like structure, others claimed they saw light around a portal-like opening, one swore the tunnel was a construct of compressed water to free a path for the boat, but all said that absolutely nobody panicked. Many likened their experience to Muggle TV and movies, such as *Star Trek*. Which, really, is very little to go on. We'll need to track down and ask more of the ones who were on the boat."

"And dig up earlier cases involving Bermuda. If I remember correctly, there have been a few over the years, and it appears something the Muggle governments of the world are unable to resolve," Snape said.

As if on cue, the Boss knocked and entered in one swift movement, a large pile of paper and parchment floating behind him. "I suspect you may find it beneficial to look at these reports. They all contain Bermuda incidents where Muggle authorities asked us for help. Some, your predecessors managed to resolve or, rather, explain away with electromagnetic vehicle activity or solar flares or meteors and some such." He dropped the pile on Hermione's desk. "Anyway, I must hurry. Mustn't be late for the play tonight." His hurried exit was interrupted by Severus's question.

"What are you going to see?"

"Oh, the Royal Shakespeare's performing *Romeo and Juliet*. Can't miss that!" He made a beeline exit for the door.

Hermione took the top of the pile the Boss had left and dropped it on Snape's desk. "Let's both read. It'll be faster."

"I need coffee first, or else I shan't be able to face this. Would you like one, too?"

"Yeah," she said absentmindedly. "Black, no sugar, please."

"Like I didn't know," he muttered on his way out.

Coffee long since finished, Hermione dropped everything when the clock hit six. Strange portals and underwater tunnels would most certainly not run away overnight, and she had calls to make and figure out some decent clothing for the next day or, rather, evening.

Snape followed suit. He had to determine an appropriate place to meet the Malfoys, hopefully far enough from other witches and wizards, and find a suitable robe for the event. Rumour had it that Muggle Royalty was attending, which was a guarantee that at least Muggles would wear their Sunday outfits. He wasn't proud by any means, but he'd be damned if he were outdressed by ordinary Muggles.

Hermione was ready to tear her hair out. Roping Luna into the plan to reverse damage where the Malfoys were concerned had been the easy part. But her clothes

presented major problems.

The periwinkle dress robe made her look like a fourth year. The pink one wasn't even an option; she had no idea why she'd ever bought it. The red one shouted Gryffindor at the top of its lungs. The green one screamed sycophant to Slytherins, so that was out of the race, too. "Oh, Merlin," she groaned at the mirror. "At this rate, I'll get the award for frumpiest witch!"

"Now, now, don't fret, dear," the annoying mirror replied. "How about asking for a little help from your friends?"

Hermione stood still for a moment. The damn mirror was right. Lavender probably felt she owed her, now that she was dating her beloved Won-Won again, and this time far more successfully by the looks of it. "Aren't you lucky I forgot to renew the Silencing Charm on you? But thanks for the idea. I won't shut you up. For now." Hermione walked to the fireplace and picked up some Floo powder from the mantle.

"Lavender?" Hermione cringed in anticipation. Lavender would look stunning with perfect make-up in a perfect-fitting robe, all the while standing in the kitchen cooking a perfect dinner.

"Hermione! Come through!" Lavender looked stunning even in the poor excuse of an apron that spouted *It's five o'clock somewhere* together with an oversized glass of margarita.

In the three seconds it took Hermione to walk into Lavender's home, the witch had managed to take off the silly apron and was her impeccable self. "Nice to see you! What's going on?" Her expression was suddenly worried.

Hermione smiled. "No, I don't want him back, I promise. I'll always love him, but I think both of us are much better off as friends." She paused momentarily, then said, "I need your help with my pathetic wardrobe. Or, perhaps, with my *excuse* for clothes. I'm going to a huge event tomorrow night, and I can't afford to look frumpy or awful or anything else that may have a negative ring to it, including slut. So, yeah, I need your help."

"Oh!" Lavender exclaimed, her relief written on her face. "No problem at all. What do you have?"

"I have a bunch of robes that either have horrid colours or horrid shapes. And I don't have time to go to Diagon Alley before tomorrow night."

"Right. Hang on a second. Need to turn the stove off." She disappeared for a moment, then returned. "Lead the way." Lavender pushed her towards the fireplace, and both witches Flooed to Hermione's flat where her robes still lay on her bed.

Lavender lifted each one, stretched it, made some noises, then dived for the pink one. "Put it on."

"No way! This looks awful on me!" Hermione protested.

"The colour does," Lavender agreed. "That doesn't mean the robe is unsuitable. Now, put it on." Her tone was bossy enough to make Hermione put the robe on.

"Now." Lavender stood there with her wand at the ready, looking thoughtful. "Oh, yes." She waved her wand, and the dress shortened marginally, and its colour changed from pink to an antiqued rose; then, a mere hint of rose shapes covered the entire fabric, and a silken scarf, much darker but with the same hint of rose design, wrapped its way loosely around her neck and shoulders. "There. Too little magic for anyone to notice, but serious improvement."

Hermione looked in the mirror and gasped. "Oh Merlin! This is... Beautiful!"

"You're welcome, sweets. Any time for you." Lavender smiled and walked to the fireplace. "Use just a little bit of blush of the same shade for your face, and make that eye shadow a creamy colour," she advised before disappearing.

Relief flooded Hermione. Thank Merlin for new old girlfriends of ex-boyfriends.

It was nearly five in the afternoon. "Let's call it a day," Snape said, in a rare mood to stop working. "There should be no stress involved in getting ready. I'll meet you... where?"

Hermione looked up and dropped the pile of papers she'd held in her hand, wondering if going out with the Malfoys made him uneasy. "Well... you know where I live..."

"Oh." He looked sheepish for a split second. "I do indeed. I shall pick you up at 6.30."

"Make it quarter to seven and I promise I'll be ready," Hermione returned. No way would she make it in an hour and a half. She needed to eat a bite, too, lest there be drinks. With Malfoys, one couldn't be careful enough.

Snape rolled his eyes at her and waved her out the door.

The knock on the door came just as Hermione put the make-up brush down. *Hm. Not too much, yes. Lavender would probably disagree, alas. It's as good as it gets.* She left the bathroom and headed for the front door.

"Hi. I'm ready. Just need to get my cloak," she said and met his eyes.

He stared for a long moment. "I should be grateful you don't dress like this for work, or else I would never get any work done," he said eventually.

Hermione didn't bother hiding the grin. "Why, thank you, kind sir. You didn't expect me to look house-elf-like next to Mrs Malfoy, did you?"

"You look stunning. Royalty may end up hating you tonight," he allowed, the corners of his lips slightly spreading as if forming a smile.

Hermione blinked. *But no. It is a smirk after all. I wonder what he looks like with a genuine smile...* "Come in while I get my cloak." She almost ran to the bedroom, dug for her best cloak in the wardrobe and returned to the living room while donning it.

"Where are we Apparating to?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

"Remember the wine bar on that side road of Charing Cross station? We'll meet the Malfoys in front of it. Well, actually, Draco will more likely join us at South Bank; his parents may need a walk in crisp air to prepare for the potential onslaught of disdain, depending on how many witches and wizards attend." He held out his arm, and she took it.

Mr and Mrs Malfoy were already waiting beside the entrance of the seedy-looking wine bar, looking utterly displaced in their elegant robes.

"Cissy, Lucius," Snape drawled. "You've already made the acquaintance of Miss Granger, but let's start over, shall we?" He turned to Hermione. "Meet Mr and Mrs Malfoy." Then he turned to the Malfoys. "Meet Miss Granger."

Hermione nodded politely, as did Lucius and Narcissa, all apparently lost for words.

"Right, then," Snape said. "Shall we? It's only a short walk across the bridge," he added, looking at the blond couple.

Half way across the pedestrian bridge, they had fallen into step: Snape and Lucius at the front, deep in conversation, and Hermione and Mrs Malfoy at the back, neither talkative.

"Oh, men," Narcissa said, smiling.

"I don't know enough about them, but I think I understand what you mean," Hermione said, unable to think of any clever response.

"You're young yet. Much time to learn. May I say that you look absolutely stunning?" Narcissa asked, offering a hesitant smile.

Hermione's eyes met the blonde's. "Thank you," she said, not hiding her surprise. "... Normally, I don't pay much attention to clothes, and I'll admit I'm Muggle at heart. Jeans and t-shirt and plimssoles will do it for me anytime. But it's a special occasion, so I figured I'll put some effort in dressing up." She returned the smile.

"You've done excellent work with that," Narcissa said. "Frankly, at home I prefer to wear my bathrobe unless there are guests, but then, we haven't had guests in a few years, so it's bathrobes most of the time. I do enjoy dressing up every once in a while, though, I admit."

Hermione looked at her and stopped. "You look beautiful, Mrs Malfoy," she couldn't help saying and blushed.

"Thank you, dear. You're very kind," Narcissa returned. "And please, let's do away with the formalities. I'm Narcissa, and I believe you are Hermione?"

"Yes. And thank you," Hermione said. It was bizarre. In the few minutes of walking with Narcissa, she had to adjust her opinion of the witch a multitude of times. Gone was the notion of the woman who looked like she'd encountered a rotten smell. Gone was the impression that she was a doormat to her husband. And gone was the belief that her acceptance of anything Muggle would only ever be put on. The witch was certainly aware of the Muggles' finer arts.

"Did you like the Berlin Philharmonic under Abbadio?" Narcissa asked.

"I like some of the recordings. More than Karajan's, but I think Simon Rattle there is the unexpected gold. Szell once recorded a Beethoven Symphony with the Berlin, and I thought it was divine, but then I heard the same symphony he recorded with the Vienna and also the Cleveland Orchestra. Compared to them, the Berlin recording sounded stale. I liked the recordings Abbadio did on Brahms. And I love the Wagner recordings of Karajan. But Simon Rattle is just... well, he's just really good," Hermione finished.

"And not bad looking either," Narcissa added. "I've not heard any recordings of Kissin, but from what I've read, he is one of the most promising young pianists. And nowhere near as good looking." She laughed.

"So true," Hermione agreed, smiling. *Evidently, the world is ending. Mrs Malfoy approves of the looks of a Muggle...*

They'd reached the other side of the river now and descended the stairs leading to Jubilee Walk. Even though the concert was still more than an hour away, the wide river walk was crowded with what looked like mostly audience. Men in suits, trousers and shirt and tie, plain jeans and sweatshirt, women in long dresses, short dresses, trousers, skirt suits, trouser suits, mostly in a multitude of greys, wizards in solemn robes, witches in robes ranging from hideous to most elegant, running through the entire colour spectrum, yet easily blending in with Muggle fashion, all headed for the entrance of the concert hall.

When the four finally made it inside, Draco was already at the bar. He waved, and they made their way over. "How convenient, Mr Malfoy." Snape inclined his head in greeting.

Draco greeted his parents and then said, "I've reserved drinks for the intermission. All under Malfoy. Perhaps we should go inside? Only fifteen minutes left."

Hermione was surprised. She'd never seen him at any Muggle event, yet he seemed to know etiquette. Or, perhaps, it was just common sense. She had no idea, and before she could dwell any longer on the issue, she saw another familiar face.

"Astoria!" Hermione walked towards the other witch, calling to Severus over her shoulder, "Yell when you go in. You've got my ticket."

"Hermione! Lovely to see you!" Astoria smiled. "It's my first classical concert I've only been to operas and musicals and I spent the last week or so reading up on Simon Rattle as well as the Berlin Philharmonic. And on Kissin. How very fascinating! You are so lucky to have grown up in that kind of culture!"

Hermione returned the smile. "It's an orchestra with an interesting past." She'd met with Astoria several times recently, often in Muggle cafés, to discuss the *Committee of Widows and Orphans* and how to most effectively help this particular group of war victims, and the two witches had become friends. She was a pureblood, but most certainly not the prototype. Astoria was not only compassionate but genuinely interested in Muggle life. When she'd heard of the Internet, she begged Hermione to explain the system to her to the point of visiting an Internet café for some hands-on experience. Her hunger for Muggle culture had since become insatiable, though she'd stuck to classical music or small, independent artists performing in cafés after trying to appreciate Muse at Wembley Stadium one night. "They are good, really, they are! Very interesting lyrics they have, but, oh, please. My eardrums almost burst that night," she'd explained to Hermione, shuddering.

"Hermione, would you mind introducing us? I do not believe I've made your friend's acquaintance," Draco drawled. "By the way, Severus sent me. It's time to find our seats."

"Draco Malfoy. Fancy that." Astoria's eyes were dancing with amusement. "You know my older sister, Daphne."

"You must be Astoria!" Draco exclaimed. "Look, I'm really sorry. My people will hex me if I make them wait. Why don't we meet here during intermission? I would love to talk to you. I've heard much about the *Committee*, and the work you've been doing is admirable."

Hermione suppressed a giggle at Draco's expression. She'd never seen him so polite, without even a hint of his usual sardonic self, probably the only leftover of pre-war Malfoy coquetry. The witches smiled and waved at each other, and Astoria threw in a casual, "Sure. I'll be here," at Draco before they parted ways.

It wasn't until everyone was seated that Hermione realised there had been no ill behaviour towards the Malfoys. *Maybe I did the right thing by agreeing to do this...she* thought as the stage started to crowd and the air was suddenly filled with the sounds of tuning instruments. The thought of Snape as a repellent to ill will nearly made her laugh.

Then the hall went silent, and Sir Simon and his musicians did what they'd come for and transported an entire audience into a different world where instead of rain, the sound of choice was piano, its gamut encompassing every emotion from harsh, demanding, through despairing sadness, into soft whispers that promised love and happier times to come. Kissin was perhaps not a wizard, but he certainly knew how to wield magic with Rachmaninoff's piano concertos.

The music ended, and the audience came out of its collective daze to applaud enthusiastically before every single member rose for a standing ovation lasting several minutes until, eventually, people remembered they had drinks waiting, remembered they needed to share the experience of listening to such magic, and remembered the desire for a bit of somewhat fresher air. Slowly, the hall emptied out into the foyer and bar.

Draco somehow managed to secure one of the few larger round bar tables and went off with Severus and his father to pick up the pre-ordered drinks. "Wasn't the music beautiful?" Narcissa turned to Hermione. "I'm almost sad this is my first experience. It will be hard to find something better."

Hermione smiled. "I find with classical music performances, even if they aren't as stellar as this one, they are always satisfying. And such exquisite events as tonight aren't really such a rarity, at least not here in London where the world class musicians mingle quite regularly. So, I take it you enjoyed this first encounter with Muggle culture?"

"It was incredible. It felt as if I was being touched by the gods," Narcissa mused. "Is all Muggle culture like that?"

Hermione couldn't help but laugh. "No," she said. "Not by any means. With the amount of commercialism, you'll naturally find a lot of rubbish that should simply not be considered art. But there are pockets in every genre, every art form, where you'll find the real thing, be it in classical, pop culture, visual arts, or any of the fringe arts."

The men arrived with drinks for all, Draco at the back deep in conversation with Astoria. Hermione took the proffered drink and took a sip. She was sure champagne hadn't been mentioned as a choice of drink, but the occasion seemed perfect for it. An excellent musical performance, an unexpectedly pleasant acquaintance with Narcissa, and as always, the anticipation of discussing the music with Snape the next day. She drank again, this time with appreciation.

"Tell me, Miss Granger, when did you turn into a beauty?" Lucius asked, his eyes venturing below her neck.

Hermione was lost for words and utterly surprised when she heard a growl coming from her left.

"Leave. Her. Alone." The growl was Severus's.

Lucius smiled thinly. "Why, Severus, I had no idea of your claim." Then he hurried to add, "Besides, it was meant to be merely... conversation."

Hermione didn't know where to look. She tried momentarily to catch Astoria's or Draco's attention, but the two were too fascinated with each other to notice any threat of disaster.

"Would you like to catch some fresh air, Hermione?" Narcissa came to her rescue. "It looks like the rain has held off."

Hermione smiled gratefully and followed the elder witch towards the nearest exit.

Once outside, the buzz and excitement reduced to an insignificant hum. "Please excuse my husband. He hasn't quite coped with being rejected by the world. He means no harm; that, I am sure of." Narcissa looked defeated.

"Oh, please, don't worry at all! I was more surprised at Severus's reaction, to be perfectly honest," Hermione assured her.

Narcissa sighed. "Severus is a stickler for manners. He may not be polite, he is sarcastic to the hilt, but he won't tolerate anything inappropriate. And Lucius's behaviour clearly was that."

The bell rang for the first time. "Let's make our way back. Most people don't bother until the third ring, and then it becomes really crowded," Hermione said, relieved to find an excuse to change the subject.

"Are you all right?" Snape asked when she took her seat next to him.

Hermione smiled. "I'm fine, thank you. And thank you for putting Lucius into place. Narcissa was rather upset about his behaviour."

"He won't approach you again, worry not." Any plan for further conversation was interrupted by the orchestra returning to the stage.

A minute or two of tuning and the audience turned silent to await the maestro's appearance.

Once more, the crowd was collectively transported to a different world. Brahms' dulcet tones of strings showed divinity and love, a horn singularly enchanted the listener's mind to feel the nearness of the source of all that is, so much comfort did it offer, and harps sounded in an ecstatic peak laying bare the wonders of the cosmos. Until silence followed.

For minutes, a needle could have been heard dropping amongst some two-and-a-half-thousand listeners. Then, within an instant, the hall went haywire. A standing ovation, hard clapping, and much whistling kept calling the maestro back to the stage repeatedly, and then the entire orchestra was called to return. The *Independent* would call it the performance of the new millennium the following day, and it wasn't an exaggeration.

At last, the stage remained empty, the applause subsided, and slowly, the audience dispersed towards the various exits.

The Malfoys, Snape, and Hermione stopped a few metres from the door. "I suspect my son won't turn up," Lucius said.

"Probably not," Narcissa agreed.

"Would you like to go for a drink?" Severus asked, looking from the Malfoys to Hermione and back to the Malfoys.

Hermione remained silent. She wasn't certain about spending more time with the Malfoys. The evening, in that respect, had been somewhat overwhelming, never mind Lucius's failed advance.

"Much too tired, but thank you, Severus," Narcissa said, oddly polite and impersonal.

Lucius glared at his wife. "I suppose I'll be taking my wife home." His sneer was light but visible.

"Well, good night, Narcissa, Mr Malfoy," Hermione said. Then she turned to Narcissa. "It was a pleasure meeting you. If you ever want to go out for a coffee or ice cream, please feel free to owl me."

"Oh, thank you! It was a pleasure meeting you, too! I will contact you in a few days. I would love to meet you again!" Narcissa smiled at her before turning to Lucius. "Now, come on, dear. Let's go home. I can't wait to get out of these robes." He looked pleased at that and took her hand.

Hermione glanced at her watch. "I doubt any good place would be open now. I do have a bottle of wine at home that I picked up on my last trip to France, if you like," she said, looking at Severus.

He swallowed. "Are you sure?"

Suddenly, everything made sense. She wanted to bang her head against some wall. How could she have been so blind? Her own pleasure in seeing him outside work. His gradual retreat from sarcastic remarks against her. His frowns when she mentioned any other male wizards. His being tongue tied when he turned up that one morning. The way he looked at her when he picked her up earlier. Finally, giggles overcame her.

"Oh, Severus! Yes! Yes, I'm absolutely sure! You silly man!" She offered her hand, he took it, and she Apparated them to her front door.

"Oh, fuck." She fumbled for her keys.

He let out a long-suffering sigh. "*Accio keys*," he said casually and handed her the keys.

"Oh. You!" Hermione had no more words and opened the door.

"Are you sure?" He still stood outside her flat.

Wordlessly, she pulled him inside and shut the door with her foot. "Please forgive me. Blame it on Ron rubbing off on me." The kiss that followed, right by the front door, was searing and heavenly and by far exceeded the taste of champagne.

Hermione woke up with an arm firmly wrapped around her middle. A smile spread across her face as she remembered the previous night. Slowly, she untangled herself to open the window for the owl, which perched on the back of a kitchen chair just long enough to receive the coins in the pouch before flying off. Hermione lit the fire for the kettle and sat down.

When she opened the *Daily Prophet*, she realised she'd never seen Luna at the South Bank. She leafed through the pages to the cultural section. Her eyes widened.

Muggle Event of the Year Attracts Muggles and Wizards Alike

Beneath a photograph that showed Hermione and Narcissa in conversation, both smiling, the caption read,

Even the Malfoys showed themselves in public for the occasion, a truly rare event these days. Mrs Malfoy has clearly lost all her prejudice against witches who lack pureblood status. Here, she is enjoying a conversation with our world's most famous Muggle-born, Hermione Granger, who is rumoured to be an Unspeakable. May it lead to an everlasting friendship.

"You're a genius, Luna," Hermione breathed. It was no surprise that the *Prophet* had been steadily gaining new readers since Luna started to work for them a year after the war.

Happy and content, Hermione prepared coffee, grabbed two mugs and returned to the bedroom. Perhaps the activities of the previous night could be repeated. Or reinvented.

"You go and meet Hermione, love," Lucius said to his wife. "I'm meeting Draco and Astoria for tea at three." He looked almost like his old smug self. The fact that his son was about to marry a pureblood who was accepted by the entire wizarding world did its magical healing on the once-formidable wizard, and he had no qualms letting his wife go out on her own. Ever since they'd attended their first concert, hostility against the older Malfoys had died down. Life was beginning to look better every day.

Narcissa Apparated to an alley near The Leaky Cauldron and, after a short walk, entered the pub. Hardly anyone looked up, and nobody jeered. She nodded at Tom in greeting and touched the bricks to gain access to Diagon Alley.

"Mrs Malfoy." A middle-aged wizard nodded his greeting.

Suddenly, Narcissa realised that others' opinion no longer mattered. If they wanted to throw rotten tomatoes, so be it. It was their problem, not hers.

"Hello, Narcissa!" Hermione smiled as she stopped in front of her.

"Hello, Hermione." Narcissa returned the smile.

"Coffee? Or perhaps ice cream here?" Hermione, of course, looked prohibitively happy these days.

"Good heavens, woman, what is it that Severus does to you?" she asked, exasperated.

"What is it that Lucius does to you?" Hermione asked.

"He loves me."

"*Word*, as the New Yorkers would say. I would prefer coffee, by the way. It's getting a bit cold for ice cream." With that, Hermione placed her hand on Narcissa's elbow and steered her through a little-known passage into Covent Garden for some decent coffee.

Original prompt: *Severus finds himself in the unexpected position of being accepted by the majority of his peers after the war, even if they think he's a cold-hearted bastard, whereas the Malfoys are scorned as turncoats, caring for nothing but their family and its survival. He wants to help them improve their position, and recruits Hermione to help in the project. She is dubious, but willing to give it a go. Then Lucius decides seduction might assist how does she react? How does Severus react? Does Lucius get anywhere? Does Narcissa decide to act as Hermione's coach? (Draco's POV on this is okay too, but you can leave Ron out of it.) Comedy is acceptable! (But no crack, please; I like fairly canon characterisation.)*

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