

A Fortiori

by Dreamy_Dragon

Hermione finds out that appearances can be deceptive when Lucius Malfoy needs her help to get out of Azkaban. And why is Severus Snape so interested in Malfoy's case?

One

Chapter 1 of 6

Hermione finds out that appearances can be deceptive when Lucius Malfoy needs her help to get out of Azkaban. And why is Severus Snape so interested in Malfoy's case?

Many thanks to my wonderful beta melusin and my lovely alpha readers chivalric and savine_snape.

Originally written as a pressie for dream_labyrinth in the sssh exchange 2011 on lj. Full prompt will be given at the end of the story.

It's not worth doing something unless someone, somewhere, would much rather you weren't doing it.

~Terry Pratchett

~~~~~

Snape pulled another weed from between his Snargaluffs. Pausing to examine his work, he nodded with satisfaction; his garden looked as it should once more. He congratulated himself on an early morning well spent. It was time for a cuppa and a bit of reading. And then he had some brewing to get on with later. All in all, it promised to be a nice day.

He didn't go as far as whistling a jaunty tune, but his step looked almost springy...until he spotted the two owls sweeping down in his direction. Both landed directly in front of him. The first one, a handsome tawny, carried an envelope made of heavy yellow parchment in its beak. Snape took the envelope gingerly. As he had suspected, it bore the Hogwarts' crest. Judging by the paper, it didn't contain an order for the more tricky potions Poppy didn't trust the new Potions teacher...whose name he could never remember for more than two seconds, some bloke from Beauxbatons...to brew, but yet another invitation from Minerva for tea or a social gathering. Snape stalked into his kitchen. He ripped the letter out of the envelope, snatched a quill from the kitchen table and, without even bothering to look at the missive, scrawled a single word on the bottom of the parchment. "No."

His reply penned, he sent the owl on its way. The second owl, a screech owl, had followed him into the kitchen. Looking slightly affronted at Severus's neglect, it fluttered down right in front of him, neatly upsetting his sugar bowl, and stuck out its leg.

'Bloody bird,' muttered Severus before relieving the owl of the rolled-up newspaper tied to its leg. A moment later, the requisite sum of coins safely stacked in the pouch on its other leg, the owl took off again, and Severus finally made the cup of tea he had planned on earlier.

Settled at his kitchen table, his mug and a bacon butty in front of him, he unfolded the *Daily Prophet*. A scowl appeared on his face as he read the headline; it deepened as he quickly flicked to the continuation of the article inside.

'Bloody hell,' he murmured.

~~~~~

At the same time, Hermione sat at the kitchen table in Grimmauld Place having breakfast when her eyes fell on the headline of today's edition of the *Daily Prophet*. The hand holding her second piece of toast stopped halfway between the plate and her mouth. 'You've got to be kidding me,' she murmured as she read the article on the front page and then quickly flicked to its continuation on the inside.

After she had finished reading the article, she stared for a while at nothing in particular before a glance at her watch reminded her that it was time to get ready for work. She was running late as it was so she'd have to Apparate directly to the office instead of walking through the crisp, autumn sunshine.

'At least he isn't one of our clients,' Hermione grumbled as she snatched her briefcase from the desk in her study.

~~~~~

*I should have known*, Hermione thought as she watched Draco Malfoy shuffle his feet in front of her desk.

When she had arrived at the offices of Granger and Patil LLP, his owl had already been waiting for her. He knew it was short notice, but it was all rather urgent, and he'd highly appreciate her assistance. Could she squeeze him in? Hermione could.

Uncharacteristically for him, Draco hadn't even made an attempt at small talk. He'd barely answered her remarks about the weather and kept playing with a small roll of parchment he'd pulled from his pocket before he finally started to speak, 'You and Padma are widely thought to be the best lawyers in wizarding Britain, and your reputation for never losing a case you take on make you seem like the best choice for the matter at hand.'

Then, he fell silent again.

'Your sudden urgent desire to talk to me wouldn't have anything to do with today's headline in the *Prophet*, would it?' Hermione asked, hoping against hope that he was here for an entirely different reason.

'Actually, it would,' Draco conceded, looking faintly sheepish.

'And?' Hermione prompted.

Draco continued to play with the parchment in his hands a bit longer before he said, 'You seemed to get along well with Father at the Ministry's reception last month.'

'If you can call talking to him for about ten minutes getting along well, then I probably did.' Hermione carefully avoided mentioning that the ten minutes in question had been the most entertaining of the whole evening.

'So I was wondering, considering that you're a brilliant lawyer...'

'Draco, stop buttering me up. If you want to ask me something, just do it.' Hermione was losing patience. Rapidly. She knew what was coming anyway, and she didn't feel like wasting another ten minutes before Draco finally got the question out.

'Ever the diplomat, eh?' Draco muttered before taking a deep breath. 'I was wondering whether you'd consider representing my father.'

Hermione had been wondering the same thing since she'd seen the headline in the *Prophet* that morning.

'Why me? And don't start the whole because I'm such a brilliant lawyer again. I know I'm good, but that can't be the only reason.'

Uncharacteristically, Draco seemed at a loss for words once more.

'Or did you think it would be a good political move because I'm Muggle-born and famous? So it would be assumed he's innocent because I'm his lawyer?'

Draco shook his head, though there was hint of a smirk on his face. 'No, but if you put it that way, it makes a lot of sense.' Then he became serious again. 'Father requested you. You know he's got the right to choose his own counsel.'

'Of course I know. I was part of the group that introduced those reforms in legal proceedings...'. While she was talking, her brain had been rapidly calculating the pros and cons of taking the case.

Finally, she made her decision. 'All right, Draco, I'll take a look at the files and let you know if I'm willing to take this on.'

'Thank you. Of course we'd be willing to pay whichever fee you'd deem appropriate.' Draco appeared relieved.

'I haven't said yes, yet,' Hermione warned him. 'I need you to sign these so that I can get access to the case files at the Ministry, and I need you to sign a preliminary contract.' She had fished the forms out of a drawer and pushed them towards a grateful looking Draco.

For security reasons, case files were neither sent by owl nor through the Floo, but delivered by a Ministry employee accompanied by two guards. Alternatively, lawyers were allowed...after several security checks...to pick the files up themselves. The procedure usually took hours, and Hermione, like most of her colleagues, had learnt quickly to demand that any case files be delivered to her office.

When Malfoy's case files still hadn't arrived by half-five, she *did* start to wish that she had gone to the Ministry personally. She was about to tell her secretary to put through another Floo call to enquire about the whereabouts of the damn files, but then decided to call herself.

Hermione needed to intimidate two subordinates before she finally got through to the appropriate employee at the MLE, who mumbled something about it being a busy day and apologised half-heartedly. Five minutes and the insinuation that she might regard this as obstruction of justice and use it later, a hassled Ministry official was on his way to the chambers of Granger and Patil.

By the time the file duplicates had arrived on her desk, it was a quarter to seven. Hermione briefly considered reading them there and then, but her stomach was rumbling. So, with a practised movement, she shoved the files into her briefcase and pulled a stack of take away menus from the bottom drawer of her desk. After briefly contemplating Chinese, she decided that she deserved a pizza after the day she'd had.

~~~~~

Hermione stretched and tried to work out the kinks in her neck before she sank back on the sofa, glad that she had the house to herself tonight. With a yawn, she selected one of the files spread out over the coffee table, pulled it towards her and started to read and take notes. The case against Malfoy seemed pretty straightforward, and the evidence conclusive. There was really little point in her taking on such a hopeless case. She sipped her tea and continued reading without much interest, skipping bits here and there until a sentence grabbed her attention. Suddenly wide awake, she frowned and read it again. And then again. Her spine started to tingle.

~~~~~

Angry, grey waves were crashing against the quay wall. There wasn't a single ray of sunshine to light up the overcast sky as an icy wind blew a few scraps of paper along

the cobblestones. Hermione cast a warming charm before she drew her cloak tighter around herself, but the cold draught still managed to creep through the thick fabric.

She started pacing along the quay, mentally running through the files and her notes once again. By the time the ferry finally arrived, she had gone from "Maybe I'm taking his case" to "No fucking way I'm going to risk my reputation on this" back to "Maybe".

A tall, dark figure stepped from the barge after it had docked. Hermione, to her surprise, recognised Severus Snape. Upon seeing Hermione, he paused briefly as if he meant to say something, but then just acknowledged her with a nod. She greeted him with a smile.

After she had settled onto the small, wooden bench, the boat pulled away from the shore. As usual, the ferryman hadn't so much as said hello and, as usual, he didn't answer Hermione's question as to whether there were any charms to make the crossing to the island go more smoothly.

Finally, the boat docked at the rocky island where the wizarding prison was located. The storm was still howling as she climbed the steep, narrow path, passing through several wards on her way. It had begun to rain now, too.

'*Impervious*,' Hermione murmured. She was almost glad to reach the only entrance to the prison that loomed dark and forbidding on top of the rocks.

After she had presented her identification, she was led into a small, dingy room reserved for visitors. It was windowless, containing only a table with a plastic chair on either side of it. A magical barrier ran across it, separating the prisoner from their visitor. Everything looked colourless and damp. While she was waiting for Lucius, Hermione shivered in the dreary space. Even without the Dementors, Azkaban was not a place where one wanted to linger.

The door to the rear of the room opened, and a guard led Lucius Malfoy inside. 'You're a popular boy today,' the guard said with a nasty grin.

Malfoy didn't answer. He was wearing the standard, coarse brown prison robes; his hands were shackled behind his back.

'Is that really necessary?' Hermione asked with a frown, pointing at Malfoy's bound hands.

The guard shrugged. 'Better safe than sorry. Some o' them can do wandless stuff.'

'Take them off,' Hermione demanded, not bothering to remind the guard that prisoners' magic was bound inside Azkaban, anyway.

'But...'

'I said, take them *off*.'

The guard flinched at her tone. After taking one look at Hermione's face, he hurried to take the shackles off Malfoy's wrists.

'Call me when you're done,' he said and then disappeared quickly.

'Sit down,' Hermione said, sitting down herself.

Malfoy parked himself on the grubby chair on the other side of the table. She took a moment to look him over. Brown was definitely not his colour. His hair hung limp and lanky down his back. He looked like he hadn't shaved for a few days; there were deep shadows under his red-rimmed eyes, and yet he was managing to give off the impression that he had just invited her into his parlour. Hermione very nearly shook her head until she observed that the hand lying on the table was shaking.

When Malfoy noticed her glance, he quickly withdrew his hand.

'Are they treating you all right?' she asked.

A brief, barely noticeable, look of surprise flitted across Malfoy's face. 'As well as can be expected,' he answered with a shrug.

'I understand that you authorised Draco to sign a preliminary contract with me that allows me access to the case files.'

Malfoy nodded.

'Now, Mr Malfoy, I'll be frank with you. What primarily informs my decision as to whether I take a case or not is whether I have a chance of winning it. However, I do have certain ethical standards I'm not willing to compromise.'

'I understand.' Malfoy's face remained the polite mask he had worn since he'd first entered the room.

'Do you? Then I have to wonder again why you thought it was a good idea to ask me to represent you.' Hermione shushed the little voice in her head that was reminding her of the substantial fees she could demand for this case.

'I only employ the best, and I'd prefer to keep my sojourn here as short as possible.'

Hermione felt a surge of hot anger cursing through her. 'Given the evidence against you, I'd say as short as possible might turn out to be a bit longer than you expected, even if we can come up with a good explanation,' she said crisply.

Suddenly, Malfoy looked very tired. 'Miss Granger, if you aren't willing to give me the benefit of the doubt, I see no point in continuing this conversation. Please consider yourself relieved of all obligations. Draco will see to your expenses.' He rose and turned towards the door at the back of the room.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. Did he mean what he'd just said? Or was it just a strategic move?

'That would be an impressive exit, Mr Malfoy. However, before either of us makes any rash decisions, I suggest we review the facts in your file first.'

Malfoy slowly turned back to her, but remained standing.

Hermione opened the file in front of her. 'At three p.m. on Sunday afternoon, a team of emergency Healers were called to the Lovegood residence near Ottery St Catchpole by Mr Xenophilus Lovegood, who had just returned from an outing with his grandson. When the Healers arrived, they found Andromeda Lovegood, née Black, floating above the garden in a semi-translucent state. Subsequent tests revealed that, though she has a limited degree of awareness, she is currently neither living nor dead. Healers at St Mungo's were able to determine her condition was caused by a curse, but could not determine the precise spell despite consultation with several Dark Arts experts. Mrs Lovegood is currently residing in the Janus Thickey Ward at St Mungo's.'

Hermione briefly looked up from reading the file to Lucius and saw that he had sat down again. 'Since Mrs Lovegood's condition was caused by a curse or curses unknown, Aurors were called in to investigate. When they searched the garden...and here comes the really interesting bit...they found a wand: willow, twelve inches, dragon heartstring core that was identified as belonging to you. *Priori Incantatem* showed that it had been used to perform an unknown curse. Are you with me so far, Mr Malfoy?' Hermione looked at him inquisitively.

Malfoy nodded.

'Further investigation revealed that you had no alibi for all of Sunday, and that you denied all knowledge as to the whereabouts of said wand.'

Malfoy nodded again.

'So these are the facts, and you know what baffles me?' It wasn't quite a rhetorical question. 'You're a wizard. How can you not know where your wand is?'

'It's not my principal wand.' He paused, then added, 'Ever since the war, I've kept a few spare wands in different places. I hadn't seen this particular wand for some time, and...before you ask...no, I don't know when I last used it.'

Hermione searched his face for a clue as to whether he was telling the truth or not. She had a feeling that he was.

Usually, her instincts were pretty good, but then he was Lucius Malfoy, and if anyone knew how to wriggle out of a sticky situation, he would. 'Hm,' she said. 'There's also the fact that you aren't particularly fond of your former sister-in-law.'

Lucius sighed. 'That fact is outdated. I don't care one way or another what Andromeda does or does not do.' He leant slightly forward. 'Miss Granger, you may not believe that the war changed some of my views, but I doubt that you would think me stupid enough to risk my current standing in the wizarding community by committing such a sloppy crime and without having an alibi on top of it.'

Hermione pretended to shuffle the papers in front of her around for a bit. 'That would be very stupid indeed,' she then conceded. 'I think you might need a good lawyer.'

'Is that a yes?'

She nodded.

'Thank you.' His smile seemed to be almost genuine and, for the first time, warmth infused Malfoy's grey eyes, which...oddly enough...caused some warmth to spread through Hermione.

~~~~~

By the time she returned to her office, all Hermione wanted was a hot bath and a cup of tea...or something stronger. She'd just pick up a few things and then go home. Her strategy for the Malfoy case could wait for another day.

'You have a visitor,' her secretary greeted her.

Hermione sighed. 'Now? There weren't any appointments.'

'He said it's urgent, and you'd definitely want to see him,' Megan replied.

A tall figure, clad in black, was standing in her office, looking out of one of the windows. When he turned round, Hermione nearly dropped her briefcase.

'Professor Snape?'

Two

Chapter 2 of 6

Hermione finds out that appearances can be deceptive when Lucius Malfoy needs her help to get out of Azkaban. And why is Severus Snape so interested in Malfoy's case?

Many thanks to my wonderful beta melusin and my lovely alpha readers chivalric and savine_snape.

The presence of those seeking the truth is infinitely to be preferred to the presence of those who think they've found it.

~Terry Pratchett

~~~~~

*The presence of those seeking the truth is infinitely to be preferred to the presence of those who think they've found it.*

~Terry Pratchett

~~~~~

'Mr Snape will do,' Snape said.

'Mr Snape, then. Please have a seat,' Hermione pointed to the visitor's chair in front of her desk before she sat down herself. 'Would you like something to drink? Tea? Coffee?'

'No, thank you.'

'So... How can I help you, Mr Snape?' Hermione peered more closely at the man she'd only seen briefly during the last thirteen years. It had to be said that he looked a lot better now than when she'd been at school. He was still lean, and his features were still prominent, but he had lost that gaunt, haunted appearance.

Snape cast a look around the room. 'I trust our conversation will remain private?'

'Granger and Patil takes all necessary measures to ensure client, or potential client, confidentiality,' Hermione replied.

'Hm,' said Snape. He had his wand out in a flash and cast Muffliato before he continued, 'I hear you might be representing Lucius Malfoy.'

Ah. That answered the question who he'd been to see in Azkaban earlier today.

'Word travels fast, it seems,' Hermione said.

'So it seems. Any truth in the rumour?' He leant back in his seat, seemingly completely at ease.

'There might be,' Hermione conceded. 'However, I'm not at liberty to discuss the case with you. Besides, why *are you* here?'

Snape looked vaguely uncomfortable. 'I'm not asking you to discuss confidential details, but Lucius deserves better than to be condemned for something he didn't do.'

'What makes you so sure he didn't do it?' Hermione leant forward.

'Do you think he's guilty?' Snape asked in return.

Hermione weighed her words carefully. 'Do I think he's capable of locating an obscure curse and using it? Absolutely. Do I think he would try to get rid of someone he doesn't like? Certainly. But I very much doubt that he'd be stupid or careless enough to leave his wand lying around after the event.'

Snape nodded. 'Exactly. Lucius is a good many things, but stupid isn't one of them. And surely you wouldn't want an innocent man rotting away in Azkaban, would you?'

Hermione nearly snorted. 'I'm not sure "innocent" is a word I'd ever use in connection with Lucius Mafloy.' She paused. 'But you can stop trying to appeal to my better nature and sense of justice. I did agree to represent him.'

Snape looked relieved. 'Good, then get him out of Azkaban. It's destroying him.'

Hermione's eyes narrowed. 'Excuse me, did you just tell me what to do?'

'I was merely making a suggestion,' Snape answered smoothly.

'Uh-huh,' said Hermione.

Snape continued, '...implying that it would be beneficial to the health and general well-being of your client if he was released on bail.'

'Hm.' Hermione wasn't convinced. 'You still haven't told me what *your* interest is in all of this.'

'I have my reasons,' said Snape.

It had been a long day, and Hermione felt tiredness creeping through her body. 'Why are you here, then?'

'So far, the evidence against Lucius is merely circumstantial. However...and please understand that I'm only presenting my own reasoning, not telling you how to proceed...given the current political climate, you will have to actually prove that Lucius is innocent in order to win this case.' Snape looked appraisingly at Hermione.

She nodded, having come to the same conclusion on the return boat from Azkaban. 'What exactly are you suggesting?'

'We need to find out exactly which curse was used and by whom. I'm offering you my not inconsiderable knowledge of the Dark Arts. Besides, I can go to places you can't.'

'Basically, you're suggesting we team up and snoop around a bit.' Hermione smiled.

'That's one way of putting it, yes.' Snape's mouth curled up in what almost looked like a smile.

Hermione suddenly wanted to see him smile more often. He'd never be called handsome, but there was something about him that made him appear very attractive, she realised with a bit of surprise. She quickly directed her attention back to the matter at hand. 'I suppose I could do with some assistance. Thank you, Mr Snape.'

'You're welcome. And you may call me Severus.'

'Right, Severus.' Hermione liked the sound of that. 'Then, it's Hermione to you. Any suggestions where to start?'

'Yes, by finding the exact curse that was used.'

'I thought St Mungo's had already consulted some Dark Arts experts?'

Severus sneered. 'Some experts indeed. I have other sources. Let me do some investigating, and I'll get back to you.'

'That sounds good. I'll wait to hear from you, then.'

Severus rose to leave. 'I'll see you soon, Hermione.'

'I'll look forward to it,' Hermione said and found that she actually meant it.

~~~~~

After she'd left a note for her secretary to file an application to get Lucius out of prison on bail, Hermione finally went home, walking through the crisp evening rather than using the Floo or Apparate. She took several deep breaths of fresh air or what passed for fresh air in London and felt a bit more awake again.

When she opened the door to Grimmauld Place, a delicious smell was wafting upward from the kitchen. She dropped her briefcase and cloak in the corridor and went to investigate. Harry was standing at the stove, stirring something in a saucepan. With a jolt, Hermione realised that he had said he'd be back today.

She greeted him with a hug. 'How was the Algarve?'

'Brilliant.' Harry grinned. 'Best training camp we've ever had. We're so going to win the league this year.'

'You'd better. I don't fancy losing ten Galleons to Padma again after the Tornados beat you in your last game.'

'Not going to happen. This year, the cup will have the Magpies' name on it. I'm making spag bol. Want some?'

'You're a life-saver. I'm starving.' Hermione sniffed in the direction of the saucepan. 'Smells good. Just let me change into something more comfortable.'

~~~~~

When she came back downstairs, a glass of wine was already waiting for her. She took a sip. 'Very nice.'

'I brought it back from Portugal.'

After Hermione had put plates and cutlery on the table, they settled down to eat.

'Delicious,' she said between two mouthfuls of pasta only to find Harry regarding her.

'You look like shit warmed over,' he said.

'Thanks. You really know how to make a girl feel special.'

'My pleasure. But seriously. Is everything all right?' he asked, pouring her some more wine.

'Yeah. Just a long day. And I've got a new client.' Hermione drained her glass and held it out for Harry to refill.

'Anyone we know?' Harry asked.

'Lucius Malfoy.' Hermione waited for the news to sink in.

Harry had been about to send the dishes over to the sink, but his wand stopped in mid-motion, causing their plates to shatter on the floor. He stared at her. 'You're having me on,' he finally said.

Hermione waved her own wand twice. The dishes reassembled themselves and then floated over to the sink. 'No.'

'But he must have loads of solicitors to handle his affairs. What does he need you for?' Harry kept looking at her as though she'd just announced that she'd never read a book again.

Hermione Accioed yesterday's *Daily Prophet* from the stack of used paper next to the bin. She folded it so that the headline was clearly visible and pushed it towards Harry. His face clouded over while he read. Hermione watched him calmly and waited for the explosion that was bound to follow.

'How can you even think of taking this case,' Harry shouted, throwing the paper down. He jumped up and started pacing across the kitchen, raking his fingers through his already untidy hair. 'Malfoy hasn't changed one bit. I bet if he could bring back Voldemort, he'd do it in a heartbeat.'

More pacing.

'And now Teddy has lost his Gran, too. He's all alone in the world, now, except for me. And you...' He seemed too agitated for words as he continued pacing.

Hermione didn't think that this was the right time to point out that Teddy still had Mr Lovegood and Luna.

'How can you, Hermione? How?' Harry's voice had grown louder with every word.

'Snape seems to think that Malfoy is innocent,' Hermione replied.

Harry stopped dead in his tracks. 'What's Snape got to do with all this?'

'He came to see me in my office after I got back from Azkaban,' Hermione explained.

'How did he even know?' Harry asked.

'I suppose he reads the newspaper too, and he'd been to see Malfoy.' She watched as Harry came back to the table and sat down.

He didn't say anything for some time, just stared at the tabletop. 'If Snape says Malfoy's innocent, then he must be,' he finally said.

Because Snape can do no wrong. Works every time, Hermione thought before she said, 'Actually, I don't think he did it, either. It's all a bit too convenient and a bit too obvious, but I suppose most people will react exactly as you did.' *Though maybe with a little less shouting.*

'Can't really blame them.' Harry poured himself another glass of wine. 'It's good then that he's got you and Snape on his side.'

Hermione yawned. 'I suppose so.'

~~~~~

Hermione arrived late at her office the next morning. She had stopped at the apothecary in Diagon Alley on her way to get some headache potion, but her head was still pounding. The fact that Megan had called in sick didn't do anything to improve her mood. Nor did the owl that arrived from the Ministry with a note saying that Malfoy's bail had been denied. No reason was given. Hermione thought about Flooding the MLE, but then decided to go in person. She swallowed another phial of headache potion and set off for the Ministry.

The official in charge was a red-haired, plump wizard who introduced himself as Colin Prewett.

'How can I help you, Miss Granger?' He asked with an insincere smile.

Hermione replied, 'I'd like to know on what grounds bail was denied to my client, Mr Lucius Malfoy.'

The smile soured. 'Oh, you're representing Malfoy, erm Mr Malfoy.' He looked at her as if she were something unpleasant he'd found stuck to the sole of his shoe. 'Let me get the file.' With a wave of his wand, a folder landed on his desk; he started to leaf through it.

'Ah. Yes,' he said after what seemed like an inordinate amount of time. 'Yes, I'm sorry we can't release Mr Malfoy on bail. There is a substantial danger that he would try to interfere with witnesses and try to abscond.'

'It is unlikely that he'd try either. Let alone both at the same time.' Hermione continued, 'My client has not been accused of a capital offence, so the denial of bail is very unusual.'

'I'd think attempted murder qualified as a capital offence, wouldn't you say?' huffed Prewett.

'My client is accused of using an unknown curse against Mrs Lovegood, not of attempted murder,' Hermione pointed out.

'Yet,' muttered Prewett.

'Excuse me?'

'Nothing, nothing,' Prewett hurried to say. 'Of course, if Mr Malfoy could be persuaded to agree to additional conditions, we might reconsider bail.'

'And what would these additional conditions be?' Hermione asked.

'House detention for one thing.'

Hermione nodded. 'I think we can agree to that.'

'We may have to increase the bond you've offered. And he'd also need a surety who is not related to him,' Prewett added. 'If you agree to the sum specified and name a surety within twenty-four hours, we will grant bail.'

Hermione took a look at the sheet of parchment he had pushed towards her. She swallowed when she saw the sum. "We will get back to you. Thank you for your time, Mr Prewett."

~~~~~

Hermione decided to walk once more. This time, not because she wanted the air, neither fresh nor the London kind, but because she was afraid she'd splinch herself if she tried to Apparate. To say she was fuming would have been the same as calling Vesuvius a campfire.

By the time she arrived back at the chambers of Granger and Patil, several stray locks had escaped her once neat bun, and little sparks of magic were sizzling off their ends.

She met Padma in the corridor, who took one look at her partner and friend and ushered Hermione into her office. She conjured a cup of tea and pointed to the sofa in the corner. Hermione looked mutinous, but sat down and took a sip of tea anyway.

It was very strong, she realised when the warm liquid ran down her throat, and it did help to calm her down a bit. Not for long, though.

'Care to tell me what's going on?' Padma asked.

'The Ministry is what's going on.' Another strand of bushy hair departed from the bun with an angry hiss. 'I've had it up to here with their bigotry and their fucking prejudices that change with the political flavour of the day.'

'Any specific reason or just the usual idiocy?' Padma didn't sound particularly surprised.

'Malfoy. They're refusing bail unless he agrees to special conditions, and apparently he's going to be charged with attempted murder.' Hermione felt the energy slowly draining out of her; her head started to pound again.

'Shit.'

'That sums it up nicely.' Hermione took another sip of tea.

'So what are you going to do?'

'Find a nanny for Malfoy, and then prove that he didn't do it.'

~~~~~

Back in her own office, Hermione Flooed Draco. He agreed to come through immediately. After he'd authorised the ridiculously large sum of bond money the Ministry was demanding, Hermione informed him of the additional requirements.

'I don't think the house detention will be a problem. "House" would include the grounds, right?'

Hermione nodded. 'Can you think of anyone who'd be willing to act as surety for him?'

'Hm, mother might be willing to do it,' Draco replied hesitantly.

'I know they're technically no longer related, but do you really think that's a good idea?' she asked.

'Probably not,' Draco admitted. 'Plus, there might be a bit of a problem with her current husband.'

'That too.' Hermione had started fiddling around with a quill on her desk while she tried to come up with another idea.

Then Draco said, 'Severus.'

'Do you think he'd be willing to do it?' Remembering the solitary figure stepping from the Azkaban ferry and the man who had turned up in her office last night, she knew the answer already.

'Yes.'

It was then that Hermione realised that Severus hadn't left any contact information.

He'd said he'd be in touch, but had given her no way to contact him. She sighed and swallowed her pride. 'I expect you know how to reach him?'

Draco nodded. 'I'll tell him to get in touch with you.' He looked as if he meant to say something else as well, but then thought better of it.

When he was about to leave, he turned around again and said, 'Thank you.'

~~~~~

Padma had found a new Muggle café that did excellent sandwiches, so she and Hermione went there for lunch. It had the added advantage that they could have another good whinge about the Ministry since they were unlikely to encounter any of their former colleagues. If you worked for the Ministry, you had lunch in the Ministry canteen. It was an unwritten law. Only in very special circumstances would one go elsewhere for lunch, and most certainly not outside the wizarding district.

A tuna mayonnaise sandwich with salad later, and Hermione was ready to face the intricacies of wizarding jurisdiction again. Which turned out to be a good thing as Severus was already waiting for her when she and Padma returned.

'About time,' he greeted her.

'And a good day to you, too,' Hermione replied. 'Have you talked to Draco?'

Severus pulled out his wand and, again, cast Muffliato. 'Yes. I will act as surety for Lucius.'

'Thank you.' Hermione scribbled his name on the parchment with the bond agreement, sending it out to her secretary. It promptly came floating back into the room.

Oh, right. Megan had called in sick. Hermione snatched the parchment out of the air and went to send it through the Floo in the outer office herself. Before she left, she cancelled Severus' Muffliato.

He recast it, just as she came back. Hermione refrained from rolling her eyes. Barely. There was such a thing as caution and there was paranoia. 'I just hope we're doing the right thing.'

'You don't have to trust Lucius, but if you want to win this case, you'll have to start to at least pretend to believe that he didn't do what he's accused of, and that he won't do anything to screw this up.' Severus was looking at her intently.

Hermione sighed. 'Actually, I do believe that he didn't attack Andromeda. I told you yesterday. It's just... He's Lucius Malfoy.'

'Yes, but he isn't an idiot,' Severus pointed out.

'Any other news?'

'I went to St Mungo's this morning. Obviously, I couldn't ask to see Mrs Lovegood, but I managed to retrieve a copy of her medical file.' He put a small parchment on the desk, tapped it once with his wand to enlarge it, and then pushed it towards Hermione.

She didn't ask how he had acquired the file duplicate, but started to read the description of the symptoms.

'Hm, basically this ties in with the Aurors' report. Semi-translucent, partly conscious of her surroundings, but neither really alive nor dead. So, she's not a ghost. And apparently the Healers have no idea as to her prognosis.' Hermione paused. 'She could die any minute.'

'Or she could remain in this state indefinitely,' Severus added.

Hermione felt her stomach twist. 'That's horrible.'

'Yes,' Severus agreed. 'One more reason to find out what and who caused it.'

'Have you ever come across a similar curse before?'

'No. Most Dark curses are aimed to torture or to kill outright. Or to use the victim to do one's bidding, like the Imperius Curse. Neither seems to be the case here.' Snape pulled the parchment towards him and looked at the description of the symptoms again.

'True, though I'm sure the conscious part of Andromeda isn't exactly happy. Still, this seems to be intended more to make the people around her suffer.'

Severus nodded. 'I agree. A good starting point would be to find out if anyone has a grudge against Andromeda and her family. However, I suggest we start with trying to find out which curse was used. This might give us a clue to the culprit as well. Not that many people have the extensive knowledge of the Dark Arts that would be required to find such an obscure curse.'

'The obvious place to start would be the Restricted Section in Hogwarts' library. As far as I know, it has quite an extensive collection of Dark Arts texts. Especially since Dumbledore's books have been added to it.' Hermione quickly thought about her appointments for the rest of the week. 'How about Saturday or Sunday? Do you have time? I'm sure Minerva would be happy to accommodate us.'

A shadow passed over Severus' face. 'No.'

'No?'

'You understood me perfectly. Hogwarts' library is out unless you want to go on your own.' Severus crossed his arms in front of him.

'But why? It's our best option, and I'm sure Minerva would be happy to see you. Every time I've met her since the war, she's been going on about how much she misses you.'

Severus didn't say anything. His posture had become even more rigid at the mention of Minerva's name.

Ah.

'This isn't about Hogwarts at all, is it? It's about Minerva.' Hermione peered at him intently. 'You're still angry with her.'

Silence.

'After all these years.'

A tiny nod.

Hermione felt a wave of sadness wash over her. 'She was supposed to hate you.'

'She was supposed to be my friend. She could have picked up on a few things.' Severus sounded like a sulking five-year-old.

Hermione wanted nothing more than to take Severus in her arms, to hold him and tell him things would be all right. She had a feeling he wouldn't respond kindly if she gave in to that particular impulse. The annoying little voice in her head pointed out that she might like to hold Severus for entirely different reasons, too.

'No. She couldn't have. You were the best bloody spy the wizarding world has ever seen. If she'd suspected the truth, others might have too, and you'd be dead.'

'Yes, well. I'd have been dead, anyway,' Severus said stubbornly.

Wrong approach, obviously.

'Well, I for one am glad that you're not. And so is Minerva.'

'Hm.' Severus's posture relaxed a bit.

'Minerva isn't young anymore. Do you really want her to die without you having forgiven her?'

'I'm not a Gryffindor. Appealing to my better nature isn't going to work,' Severus pointed out.

Hermione tried a different angle. 'Forgiving Minerva, or at least pretending to, would be a good strategic move? Because we urgently need the Hogwarts library?' she wheedled.

'You're not going to give up, are you?' Severus sounded weary.

Hermione shook her head. 'No.'

Severus hesitated, then said, 'I suppose the Restricted Section might be of some use.' He paused. 'Saturday. Apparition point outside the gates. Ten a.m.'

Three

Chapter 3 of 6

Hermione finds out that appearances can be deceptive when Lucius Malfoy needs her help to get out of Azkaban. And why is Severus Snape so interested in Malfoy's case?

Many thanks to my wonderful beta melusin and my lovely alpha readers chivalric and savine_snape.

Sometimes glass glitters more than diamonds because it has more to prove.

~ Terry Pratchett

~~~^~~~

The gates shimmered into view before her. Hermione waited a few seconds until the spinning sensation stopped. The clear autumn sunlight made the winged boars on top of the pillars flanking the gate seem almost alive. Behind the gates, the path leading up to the castle lay calm and peaceful.

*Shouting, accompanied by flashes of light from various wands... crumbling stones... glass shattering from windows... more shouting mixed with screaming... broken, dead bodies on the ground...*

Hermione pushed the images assaulting her back to a very deep realm of her unconscious and deliberately focused on the distant castle, looking whole and healthy in the sunshine.

Without noticing it, Hermione had begun to pace in front of the gates, looking at her watch for the fifth time in as many minutes. Ten more minutes. Assuming Severus showed up as planned.

Dark, guarded eyes seemed to look up at her from behind a curtain of black hair with a few silver threads running through it.

Since their meeting three days ago, she'd thought about those eyes while she was having a shower, eating breakfast, lunch and dinner, during her way to and from work, before she went to sleep and when she woke up. When she wasn't thinking about his eyes, she thought about his hands and the way he looked much nicer now, or about his motives for getting involved in this.

Eight to ten. More pacing.

The air started swirling, signalling the arrival of another. Hermione put a hand on her wand, but withdrew it when she recognised the form of Severus Snape materialising next to her.

He briefly nodded in greeting before he turned towards the gates. Hermione saw his back go rigid and his face freeze. He stood still as if he'd been hit by *Betrificus Totalus*, eyes fixed at the looming silhouette of the castle in the distance.

Hermione sidled closer to him and put her hand in his. 'You've never been back, have you,' she said softly.

The shake of Severus' head was barely noticeable. Hermione squeezed his hand. He didn't show any obvious reaction, but seemed to relax a fraction.

Minerva came striding down the path towards them. With a swish of her wand, the gates opened, allowing Severus and Hermione entrance to Hogwarts' grounds.

Hermione hadn't realised that she was still holding Severus' hand until Minerva's eyes came to rest on their linked fingers. Severus must have noticed at the same time as Hermione felt his hand withdraw.

Minerva took another few steps towards them, her hand outstretched. 'Severus.'

'Headmistress.' A stiff nod.

Minerva stopped dead in her tracks as if someone had slapped her.

Hermione quickly stepped in, taking Minerva's hand. 'Minerva, it's good to see you.'

'Hermione. How are you?'

'Fine, thank you.' They had begun to trek up to the castle. Minerva and Hermione were leading the way, Severus trailing behind. 'How are you? How are things at the school?'

'Fine,' Minerva replied.

Silence was stretching between them as they ascended the narrow path. Had the way from the gates always been this long?

'When I said "fine" earlier, I meant great. Really, it's going great. Padma and I have a lot of work, and new clients keep coming in. Which is really good, considering we've only been in business for a year. Of course, some people knew us already from when we were working for the MLE, and did you know that Draco Malfoy of all people is helping us? Establishing contacts and all that. Of course, it's been really helpful; you know how it is. I mean, who would have thought a year ago when we started that we'd really make a go of it. And we keep acquiring new clients, and really, being on the other side of the Wizengamot is so much more interesting...' Hermione seemed unable to stop the stream of words that was coming out of her mouth.

Minerva, who had no chance of getting a word in edgewise, seemed to be content to make the appropriate noises whenever Hermione had to pause to take a breath; yet, she looked oddly relieved when they finally reached the Entrance Hall.

They had stopped at the foot of the staircase. 'Would you like a cup of tea?' Minerva offered.

'No.' Severus had crossed his arms in front of him and was peering up the staircase.

Hermione cast a glance at him. He looked decidedly uncomfortable underneath the stony expression on his face. 'I think it might be best if we started right away,' she said.

Minerva nodded stiffly. 'Very well, then. I trust you both know the way to the library. Irma will let you into the Restricted Section.'

Without a further word, Severus began mounting the stairs.

'Thank you, Minerva. I'll talk to you later,' Hermione said before she followed him.

She caught up with him at the top of the stairs. Saturday morning meant that there were a lot of students about in the corridors. Several stopped and stared at them...well, mostly at Severus...and Hermione could hear some distinct whispering as they passed a group in Quidditch training gear. If Severus heard it too, he pretended not to notice; he simply stalked through the hallway, the crowd parting before him. *Just like in the old days.* Hermione thought with a small grin.

~~~~~

In the library, Madam Pince greeted her with a perfunctory nod and a short, 'Miss Granger,' before she exclaimed, 'Severus,' and enveloped him in a hug. To Hermione's surprise, he returned the hug, looking pleased.

'Minerva told me you'd be coming.' Madam Pince was beaming at Severus. 'Come. I've set up a little workspace for you back in the Restricted Section.'

'Thank you,' Severus said.

She led the way, still holding Severus by the arm and nattering on about the latest acquisitions in the Dark Arts.

'Don't mind me,' Hermione muttered as she followed them. Who knew Madam Pince could be so enthusiastic about something that wasn't a book?

After Madam Pince had settled them, or rather Severus, at the table in the corner while Hermione made herself comfortable, she left them to their research.

Hermione cast a quizzical glance at Severus, but he didn't look like he was going to volunteer any explanation. Not that she had thought he would. She pulled a folder out of her bag. 'I've made a list of books that I think might be helpful...' she began, seeing that Severus had taken a list from a pocket of his robes.

'I don't like to waste my time.' He raised an eyebrow at her baffled expression.

'So I see.' She continued to stare at his list.

'Shall we go and find some books, then?' Severus asked, a definite note of amusement in his voice. 'Unless you'd like to contemplate my list-making skills for a bit longer, of course.'

'Erm, yes. Finding books.' Hermione practically fled into the stacks. She paused as soon as she was out of sight. Severus had a list. She felt like doing a little dance. Finally, someone who understood the necessity of being prepared and didn't expect her to wipe his arse for him.

Though from what she'd seen so far...despite the voluminous robes he was wearing...it seemed to be a rather nice arse. Hermione began to mentally make a list of Things To Do With Severus that involved a variety of his body parts. Not to mention that the man liked lists. Which brought her fantasies to a crashing halt.

Right: list, books, research about obscure curses.

Her heart began to beat faster again. This time, not in the rhythm she'd come to associate with Snape, but in the rhythm that was reserved for research...though today, the two seemed to be oddly similar. Hermione consulted her list again and started to wander slowly through the corridors between the shelves, pulling out a book here and there to leaf through it. Either it went back to its place on the shelf or it was added to the growing stack floating behind her.

The smell of parchment, old leather and the specific odour of well-kept books drifted into her nose. Hermione inhaled deeply. It smelled like home. Like the place where she had always felt safest in the world; like her refuge where she was always welcome and understood. She ran her fingertips reverently over some of the spines, making the books purr. A content little sigh escaped her as she made her way back to the table.

Severus was back already, sat at the table, his head in a book. He glanced up briefly when Hermione's books landed on the table with a soft "thump" before he buried his nose in the book again, his hair falling forward to obscure his face. He looked a lot more content than Hermione had seen him since he'd come to her office a few days ago.

Had it really been only a few days ago? How had he managed to sneak his way into her thoughts so constantly in such a short time?

It's not only your thoughts he's sneaked into, is it? The little voice in Hermione's head piped up.

She shushed it and...again...directed her thoughts back to the research at hand. She picked the most promising book from her stack and started to read.

They worked in silence, both of them making notes on the parchments lying next to them, but neither feeling the need to talk. Hermione occasionally glanced at Severus. He seemed to be fully concentrated on his reading, though she could have sworn she felt his eyes resting on her every now and then, too, but she never caught him at it.

Neither noticed how much time had passed until a house-elf appeared with a soft "pop" next to their table, startling both of them. Hermione's hand immediately twitched towards her wand. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Severus making a similar gesture. Recognising the elf, she withdrew her hand.

'Madam Headmistress says to fetch you for dinner.' The house-elf bowed.

A dark scowl appeared on Severus' face, but before he had a chance to say anything, the elf added, 'Madam Headmistress says to tell Headmas...Mr Snape that there's Toad in the Hole. And elves have made onion gravy and mashed potatoes.'

'Tell Madam Headmistress she's a sneaky old bint.' Looking at the elf's pained expression, Severus added, 'No, don't tell her. I'll tell her myself. At dinner.'

He rose. 'Are you coming?' he asked Hermione, who had watched the exchange with interest and filed the knowledge away for further reference.

Severus' question was answered by an audible rumble from her stomach. A quick glance at her watch told her that breakfast had been a long time ago. She nodded and followed him out of the library.

'Found anything?' Hermione asked, extracting her foot from a step that suddenly had disappeared at their approach.

Severus shook his head. 'No, not even the slightest reference.'

'Me neither. I'll look again after dinner, though I'll probably come back tomorrow as well to go through the rest of the books,' she replied, navigating her foot over another dubious-looking step.

'That's rather a lot of books to go through on one's own,' Severus said.

'It is. Some assistance might be really helpful. Of course, it would need to be someone who knew what they were doing.'

Severus cast her a sidelong glance. 'I could think of worse ways of spending my Sunday.'

Hermione beamed at him as the third staircase in a row swung to accommodate Severus. Oddly enough, vanishing steps seemed to solidify as soon as his foot came near them, too.

~~~~~

As Hermione and Severus entered the Great Hall and made their way along the house tables, the level of noise increased considerably, and many students turned around to look at them or, more specifically, at Severus. Again, he seemed not to notice the stares and chattering, though he briefly glanced at the Slytherin table.

Two places had been laid at the Head table for them. Minerva had seated Severus between herself and the current Potions master. Hermione was sat on Minerva's other side.

Severus was soon deeply in conversation with the Potions master, which left her free to catch up with Minerva and enjoy the food. House-elves in general tended to be excellent cooks, and the Hogwarts elves were no exception.

For pudding, there was apple crumble with custard and, judging by the sly glimpse Minerva threw at the man next to her, this was another of Severus' favourites. Hermione added his taste in desserts to the list of Things She Liked About Severus as she scooped a second helping onto her plate.

The students soon started to shuffle out of the Great Hall, barely looking at the Head table anymore. Apparently, the news that Severus Snape, *the* Severus Snape, was at Hogwarts tonight had grown old quickly. Hermione had long stopped being newsworthy, which was fine with her.

Cups of coffee had appeared before the adults. Hermione sipped hers, feeling very mellow. Maybe another hour or three in the library and then go home, get a good night's sleep and come back early tomorrow. She turned to her neighbour. 'Minerva, I was wondering if it would be all right for us to come back tomorrow and continue our research? There's a lot more material than we expected.'

'Of course. You're welcome to use the library as long as you need.' Minerva paused. 'Actually, if you like, I can arrange guest rooms for you.'

Hermione cast a questioning glance at Severus, who...to her surprise...looked as mellow as she felt. He shrugged.

'That would be great. Thank you, Minerva.' Hermione smiled. She looked up at the enchanted ceiling that showed a clear evening sky, the candles not yet lit and suddenly her life in London felt pleasantly far away.

~~~~~

Hermione was making her way down from the owlery, the owl to Harry letting him know where she was safely on its way. Was that another consequence of the war? Even thirteen years down the line, both Harry and she always made sure to let the other know where they were.

Her musings were interrupted when she glanced out of one of the tower's windows and spotted a lone, dark figure strolling across the grounds towards the lake.

A walk after spending the day holed up in the library seemed like a very nice idea indeed. After a quick detour through the kitchens, Hermione was out in the grounds, too. Though autumn was clearly in the air, the evening was surprisingly mild. She wandered down the path that led to the water's edge. The lake was calm, with only an occasional mild breeze ruffling its surface. Nearly halfway around the lake, a beech tree spread its branches over a patch of grass. She found Snape sitting underneath it, staring at the lake. She walked up to him and asked, 'Mind if I join you?'

'Please do.' He pointed at a spot next to him.

Hermione cast a cushioning and a warming charm...it was September after all...before she sat down on the ground. She pulled out two shrunken bottles of bitter she had obtained from the kitchen elves earlier, enlarged them, and offered one to Severus.

'Cheers.'

They sat in peaceful silence, gazing over the lake and sipping their beers.

'I had completely forgotten how beautiful this place is,' Hermione said. 'I used to come here a lot.'

'It was one of my favourite places, too, during my first years here.'

Hermione imagined a stringy, pale boy with black hair stretched out beneath the tree, reading a book. What had he been like?

'I haven't been down here in a long time,' Severus said softly. 'It's good to be away from the castle for a bit.'

Hermione nodded, remembering the stares and whispers. Had he always felt the need to get away from the castle? Certainly during his year as Headmaster, any refuge must have been welcome. How had it been when he was a student? Or in the years before Voldemort returned? She hoped there were some good memories among all the horrible ones. Again, she knew better than to ask, but was glad he'd decided to stay overnight.

They sat in silence again, each busy with their own thoughts. Hermione leant back against the tree and sneaked a side-long glance at the man next to her. He seemed almost relaxed. She sidled a bit closer to him. His black wool robes looked cosy and warm. She contemplated leaning against him; maybe if she pretended to doze off, she could put her head on his shoulder, just so...

Hermione's reverie ended abruptly when Severus said, 'Can I ask you something?'

She had a feeling his question wouldn't include an invitation to snuggle closer to him. 'Go ahead.'

'Why did you decide to take on this case? And why are you putting so much effort into it? You don't seem to like Lucius very much.'

'I believe in justice. No one deserves to rot in Azkaban for a crime they didn't commit,' Hermione replied.

'Even if it's Lucius Malfoy?'

'Even if it's Lucius Malfoy. Besides, I don't know if I like him or not. Whenever I've met him over the last few years, he's been nothing but polite and respectful towards me. It may just be an act, but he does seem to have changed since the war.'

Severus nodded. 'He has. The last year under Voldemort's reign was hell for him and his family.' He hesitated. 'I'm not sure he ever thought through all that pure-blood crap properly to begin with. Lucius likes power, and he wanted his family to be safe; Voldemort seemed to offer him exactly what he wanted.' Severus paused again. 'Like all of us. However, having Voldemort take over his house and tormenting him, Draco and Narcissa, certainly changed Lucius' mind about a great many things.'

'Hm,' said Hermione. 'He and Draco seem very close.'

'Yes. It took them a while after the war, and Narcissa leaving for another man didn't help matters much, but eventually they reconciled.'

'How is he?'

'Glad to be home, I think. He's already starting to complain about his favourite shampoo being almost finished'

'That sounds like Lucius.' She grinned as she pictured Lucius wearing an elegant bathrobe...definitely Egyptian cotton not polyester...standing in a luxurious bathroom, shaking a nearly empty shampoo bottle.

Without noticing it, Hermione had started to trace her fingertip along the rim of the bottleneck. 'Can I ask you something as well?'

'Can't stop you asking. I don't promise to answer, though.'

'Why are you so interested in all of this?'

'I believe in justice,' Severus replied.

'Uh-huh. And Lucius Malfoy's case just so happened to show up on your personal "let's claim fair proceedings for all" radar.'

'You'd be surprised about the things that show up on my radar.' His dark eyes looked at her with an intensity that made heat spread all through her body.

Which would have been nice, actually, if she hadn't been so determined to find out what was behind his dedication to this case. She didn't fail to notice that she rather liked his dark, intense eyes, though.

'Lucius is a friend,' Severus finally said.

Hermione nodded. That made sense. From what she knew about him, Severus was deeply loyal to his friends. Her eyes came to rest at the scar that was visible on his neck above the top of his collar.

She kept staring at it, and things began to fall into place. 'It was Lucius,' she said.

'Sorry?' Severus stared at her like a deer that had finds itself suddenly in front of very bright and shiny headlights.

'At the end of the war, Lucius found you in the Shrieking Shack. He saved you and hid you until you were ready to make a reappearance in the wizarding world.'

'Yes,' admitted Severus in a small voice.

Hermione felt her worldview shift. 'I'd never have thought Lucius capable of such a selfless act.'

'Lucius is capable of a great many things,' Severus said, sounding more like his usual self again.

'That, on the other hand, I have no trouble believing.'

They sat in companionable silence for a bit longer, and Severus didn't object when Hermione leant against him, though she didn't quite put her head on his shoulder.

Hermione refreshed her warming charm, but it didn't help much against the dampness that had begun to creep into her clothes. 'It's getting cold,' she mumbled sleepily.

'Yes, we should get back to the castle.'

Neither moved.

By the time they finally got up, it had become pitch-dark and only very few windows up at the castle were still illuminated.

They trudged up the stairs to the guest wing in silence until they reached their respective rooms.

'Goodnight, Hermione.'

'Goodnight, Severus. I'm glad you decided to come.' On impulse, she reached up and pressed a kiss to his cheek and then disappeared quickly into her room before he had time to react.

~~~~~

Hermione didn't see Severus when she came down to breakfast the next day. The sun was shining; Sunday breakfast at Hogwarts was the stuff of legend, and she had a whole day in a fabulous library ahead of her. Life was good. Which of course had nothing to do with the fact that the day in the fabulous library would include Severus. Nothing at all.

She was happily munching a bowl of cereal, only half-listening to what Hooch was telling her, but managing to make the appropriate noises of interest whenever her mouth was empty to keep the conversation going, when Clarke, Flitwick's successor as Charms teacher, appeared on her other side.

'Morning,' she said with a scowl on her face, throwing down the *Prophet on Sunday*. 'It's a disgrace.'

Hermione pulled the newspaper towards her. "Bail for Notorious Death Eater" screamed the headline. Her good mood vanished like a Diricawl that has spotted danger. She didn't take the time to argue with Clarke, but hastily finished her breakfast before she practically ran up to the library.

Severus was already sat at their table, his nose buried in a book while he made notes on a sheet of parchment. He looked up when she approached. 'Morning, sleepyhead.'

'Morning. Have you seen today's paper?' Hermione asked.

'No. What happened?'

Hermione Accioed the *Prophet* from the circulation desk, hoping that Madam Pince would forgive her, and put it on top of the book Severus had been reading.

'Brilliant. Just the kind of publicity we need,' Severus said when he saw the headline. 'We'd better get on with our research.'

'My thoughts exactly,' Hermione replied, already busy with the next book.

~~~~~

It was late afternoon by the time they had worked their way through all the books on their list.

Hermione closed the last book with an audible "snap". 'Anything?' she asked.

Severus shook his head. 'No. Not even the faintest hint.'

'I haven't found anything, either.'

Severus quickly cast Muffliato. 'I suppose between us we've located all relevant books in here. Any suggestions?'

Hermione shrugged. 'I don't know. Maybe we have been going about this the wrong way. Maybe looking for someone who has a grudge against Andromeda or her family would be the better option.'

'How about everyone who has ever had the misfortune to pick up *The Quibbler*? Severus paused. 'Why don't we explore both options? Try to think about where the source of the curse could be and investigate the Tonks-Lovegood family at the same time?'

'Good idea. Let's hope either route yields a clue. Any clue.' She started to gather her belongings. 'I want to say goodbye to Minerva before we leave. Do you want to come?'

Severus took some time to put his parchments and quill in order, shrinking them and storing them meticulously into the pockets of his robe before he nodded.

They found Minerva in her office, marking essays.

'Thank you for letting us use the library and having us overnight,' Hermione said. 'It was nice to be here again. I just wish we'd had more time to talk.'

'That would have been nice,' Minerva agreed. 'You must come again soon, Hermione.'

Hermione nodded.

Severus had hovered behind them. Now, he took a step forward and extended a hand. 'Thank you.'

Minerva took his hand. 'Severus, I...'

'I know,' he said.

Their hands remained linked for some time before they let go.

'I see Slytherin is in the lead for the House Cup,' Severus quipped.

'It's early days yet,' Minerva replied with a smile.

~~~~~

Despite the lack of results concerning their case, Severus looked a lot more relaxed as they walked down to the gate than he had the day before. When they reached the Apparition point outside, he said, 'I'm going to Malfoy Manor to check on Lucius. Fancy coming along?'

Hermione fiddled with her cloak while she thought about Severus' suggestion.

Finally, she said, 'All right.'

## Four

### Chapter 4 of 6

Hermione finds out that appearances can be deceptive when Lucius Malfoy needs her help to get out of Azkaban. And why is Severus Snape so interested in Malfoy's case?

Many thanks to my wonderful beta melusin and my lovely alpha readers chivalric and savine\_snape.

---

*Sometimes it's better to light a flamethrower than curse the darkness.*

~ Terry Pratchett

~~~~~

Hermione held on to Severus' arm as the gates of Malfoy Manor appeared before them. Surely he wouldn't mind if she stayed close to him for a bit longer? Only to make up for the unpleasant sensation of Side-Along Apparition, of course.

The Manor loomed in the distance, scarcely visible at the end of the long drive.

Pain... unbearable pain that didn't stop... Bellatrix Lestrange shrieking madly... more pain...

Hermione's legs had started to feel very unsteady as her eyes remained fixed on the drive beyond the gates.

'Hermione?' Severus asked gently. 'Are you all right?'

She clung to his sleeve; any word that tried to get out encountered a block in her throat until she'd managed to shove the images back into a far corner of her mind and put a lid with a lock and key on them.

'Hermione?' Severus asked again.

'Yeah. I'm fine.' She managed to let go of his arm.

Severus briefly put a hand on her shoulder before he advanced towards the gates, which started to swing open. Hermione followed him, her legs still a bit wobbly. When she approached the gates, they clanged shut again, and the iron coiled into snakes, hissing and spitting at her.

Both Severus and Hermione took a hasty step back.

'Look, this is a bad idea. I think I should go home.' Hermione retreated another step, causing Severus, who had been staring transfixed at the hissing and spitting coils of iron, to snap out of his trance.

'Bloody gates,' he muttered.

'Not very welcoming, are they?'

'Protection against possible intruders. I'd forgotten about it because the wards recognise me, so I can pass through them. But you can't.'

'I noticed.' She took a third step back. 'Maybe you should go on your own. I don't mind.'

'Don't be silly,' Severus snapped before he took out his wand. He went closer to the gates again. At his approach, the coils stopped writhing. He murmured something, and a translucent, silver-white bird shot out of his wand, over the gates and soared in the direction of the house. 'Someone will be down to fetch us.'

Hermione was still squinting after the Patronus, trying to discern its exact form when Severus' sentence fully registered. 'Did you just call me silly?'

'Stopped you from leaving, didn't it?' Severus didn't sound the least bit apologetic.

'You'd better come up with a better idea next time.' Hermione directed a half-hearted glare at him.

It didn't take more than a few minutes before a house-elf appeared. He peered at them through the bars and then made the gates swing open with a snap of his fingers. When Hermione and Severus approached, he bowed low. 'Welcome to Malfoy Manor.'

'Thank you.'

As they were following the house-elf along the drive, Hermione muttered, 'Couldn't we just Apparate to the front door?'

Severus shook his head. 'No, you can't Apparate anywhere within the Manor grounds unless the wards recognise you.'

'Figures,' mumbled Hermione, just as two white peacocks crossed in front of them. 'Peacocks. He's got white peacocks?'

Severus only shrugged.

Hermione stared after the two birds strutting away over the lawn. She started giggling until she was shaking with laughter. A quick glance at Severus showed that the corners of his mouth had begun to curl upward, too. That and the peacocks helped to defuse the last coils of tension still lodged in her stomach.

At least until they were standing in the hall of the manor; the house-elf had taken their cloaks, and then another had appeared, announcing, 'Master is in the drawing room. Please, follow Basky.'

Hermione's legs remembered that they were feeling shaky. Taking a deep breath, she followed the elf along the corridor. She paused again at the door before she took a deliberate step across the threshold...

...and found herself in a room that bore no resemblance to the scene of her nightmares. The afternoon light shone through two large windows; a fireplace dominated the wall opposite them. The other walls were lined with a sideboard, display cabinets and a few bookcases. A comfy-looking, dark blue sofa and two arm chairs were placed in the middle of the room. The coffee table in front of the sofa was strewn with books, newspapers, three mugs and two empty plates.

Hermione's eyes were arrested by a blond boy who was busy on the floor building what looked like the beginnings of a castle, Lucius knelt next to him. At their entrance, both looked up, and Lucius rose to greet them. 'Miss Granger, Severus. It's a pleasure to see you.'

'Hi, Hermione, Severus.' Draco was sprawled in one of the armchairs.

'Miss Granger, I don't believe you've met my grandson, Scorpius Hyperion Malfoy?'

'Hello, Scorpius.'

The boy, who looked to be about five or six, had come over, too. 'How do you do.' He extended his hand, peering at her.

Hermione shook it. 'How do you do.'

'Grandpa and I are building a castle,' he informed her.

Hermione's worldview shifted some more. 'May I have a look?'

Scorpius nodded and led her over to the fireplace.

'That looks very nice. I'm sure it'll be an impressive castle when it's finished.'

'It'll be guarded by dragons so no nasty people can get in,' Scorpius said.

Draco had wandered over to them. 'That's enough, Scorpius. Come, it's time to go home. Grandpa and his friends have things to talk about.'

'Why can't we talk about things, too?'

'It's just boring stuff,' said Hermione.

Scorpius didn't look entirely convinced. He tilted his head and eyed Hermione. 'Can't you come home with us? We could play Exploding Snap.'

'That would be lovely. I'd much rather play Exploding Snap with you, but I have to stay here. Sorry.'

Scorpius looked mutinous, but didn't say anything after a stern look from Draco.

After Draco and Scorpius had left, Hermione turned around to see that Severus and Lucius were regarding her.

'He's lovely,' she said, earning her an indulgent smile from Lucius. There were still shadows under his eyes, but he was clean-shaven, and his hair looked silky-smooth again. And those robes fitted him perfectly.

Lucius had obviously caught her ogling him. 'Can I offer you something? Tea? Coffee? Or maybe something else?' His smile became predatory.

'Tea would be fine. Thank you.'

'Severus?'

'Tea, please.'

Basky reappeared out of nowhere to clear the mugs and empty plates away. A few minutes later, a tray with a teapot, three cups and saucers, a milk jug, a sugar bowl and a plate of biscuits appeared on the coffee table.

'Milk and sugar, Miss Granger?'

'Just a splash of milk, thank you.'

After he'd handed the cup to Hermione, he poured another one for Severus, adding a generous amount of milk and a teaspoon of sugar before he passed it to him, their hands touching briefly. To his own cup, Lucius added only a drop of milk and no sugar.

When they were all installed around the coffee table, Lucius in the arm chair that Draco had occupied earlier, Severus and Hermione on the sofa, Severus asked, 'Have you seen today's *Prophet*?'

Lucius shrugged. 'It's good to know one is still worth a headline.'

Severus looked worried. 'Do you have the *Vigilans* charm still in place?'

'It was renewed recently. There've been a few Howlers this morning, but nothing really sinister. And the manor is practically impenetrable.'

'I thought you weren't supposed to use magic?' Hermione asked.

'Who says I used magic?' Lucius replied, his face a perfect picture of innocence.

'Hm.' Hermione cast him a suspicious glance before she took a sip of her tea. It tasted smooth, elegant just like the man who had offered it. Not that she planned on tasting Lucius in any way, shape or form.

Lucius asked, 'Any progress on the case? Severus mentioned you'd planned to look through some of the books in the Hogwarts library.'

Hermione shook her head. 'Nothing. Not a mention of a curse that looks even remotely like the one that was used on Andromeda.'

'We thought it might be more useful to look for a motive rather than the curse itself,' Severus added.

'It seems the most obvious suspects would be former Death Eaters and their sympathisers.' After a look at Lucius, Hermione quickly said, 'I mean, those that still stick to their former beliefs.'

'Though that might be hard to ascertain,' Lucius pointed out. 'Apart from those that are either dead or still in Azkaban.'

'Nott's son and Jugson come to mind,' Severus said.

Hermione saw that he and Lucius exchanged a look that seemed to contain an entire conversation from which she was excluded.

'I could check the Ministry's records tomorrow,' Hermione suggested. 'But it's all very vague.'

Lucius appeared thoughtful, but then seemed to come to a conclusion. 'Of course, one might look for the curse in books that wouldn't be kept in a school library.'

'Oh?'

'For example, my own family has managed to collect a few interesting volumes over the centuries...'

Severus snorted.

'...If you think it might help, feel free to look through them,' Lucius continued.

Hermione put down her cup. 'I'd love to see them, but you *do* know this might not exactly help to exonerate you.' She looked at the newspaper on the table. 'But then, as far as the public and the Wizengamot are concerned, you're guilty anyway.'

'And of course, we must believe everything we read in the *Prophet*,' Severus added helpfully.

'Trouble is, a lot of people do.' Hermione turned to Lucius again. 'Can I see the books?'

'Come with me.' Lucius rose and motioned for her to follow him, Severus bringing up the rear. 'This is bound to be good,' he murmured.

Lucius led them down the hallway and into another room. Hermione's heart started to beat faster at the sight before her. All the walls were lined with bookcases, even around the two windows. A table with an elaborately wrought candelabra on it graced the centre of the room, a number of comfy looking chairs placed around it. In the corner, she spotted a dark green sofa that seemed to invite her to curl up with a book. Hermione let her eyes wander along the shelves, inhaling deeply. The room smelled wonderful, almost like the Hogwarts library, but more airy, more like it was used only by a select few. She had to restrain herself from not going and exploring all its treasures right away. She turned to Lucius. 'This is marvellous.'

He smiled. 'You're welcome to look around; be my guest.'

Hermione started to stroll along the shelves, noticing how the books were grouped and occasionally running her fingertips over some of the spines. She could feel Lucius' eyes on her, and the feeling wasn't unpleasant.

She had no idea how long she had wandered around the library looking at the books, occasionally pulling one out and leafing through it before she was distracted by another gem.

Someone cleared their throat. She turned around to find Lucius' gaze on her. He flicked his wand, and a couple of books floated from their place on the shelves onto the reading table.

'Ahem,' said Severus.

Lucius' wand quickly disappeared up his sleeve, and he busied himself with arranging the books on the table. Hermione pretended to ignore his display of magic.

'I take it the Malfoy collection has piqued your interest?' he asked, looking at her again.

'It's brilliant. I could spent ages in here.' She beamed at him.

'Feel free to explore.'

Hermione had the feeling that he wasn't talking just about the library.

'If you two have quite finished, could we get back to the more pressing questions?' Severus grumbled.

'I'm sure Miss Granger would agree that we were fully concentrating on the matter at hand.'

Severus rolled his eyes and picked up one of the books on the table.

'These might be a good point at which to start.' Lucius pointed to where Severus was sitting, his nose now buried in a book. As Hermione went to join him, a snowy-white Kneazle, its ears, nose and tail tinged with the faintest hint of beige, wandered into the library. It twined itself once around Lucius' legs, purring, and then briefly stopped in front of Hermione. Blue eyes looked up at her. Apparently she passed muster as she was graced with a twine around her legs, too, before the Kneazle padded over to Severus. It lightly leapt onto his knees and then curled up on his lap, purring. 'He's beautiful,' she said.

'It's a she.'

'Of course,' murmured Hermione.

'Her name's Cassiopeia.'

She watched as Severus' long fingers stroked the purring Kneazle on his lap, his expression softer than she'd ever seen it. Surely those fingers would feel nice on her skin, too? The thought made Hermione nearly purr as well.

~~~~~

Hermione put the heavy volume aside. Her eyes were burning, and her stomach felt queasy. A look at her watch showed that it was well past dinner time. She stifled a yawn. 'I should really go home. May I have another look at these tomorrow?' She pointed at the books on the table.

'Of course.' Lucius looked at her in away that made her feel tingly all over.

'Thank you.'

'I should go to,' Severus said.

'Maybe a light supper before you leave?' Lucius asked.

'Thank you,' said Severus.

'That would be lovely,' Hermione added.

Lucius led them over to what turned out to be a fairly formal dining room where the table had been set for three, offering them the choice between three different pies, lentil salad, tomato salad, a green salad and assorted nibbles.

'A light supper, eh?' Hermione muttered to Severus when Lucius was out of earshot.

'Pure-blood etiquette,' Severus answered.

~~~~~

Afterwards, as Severus and Hermione were walking back to the gates, she said, 'He seems to be coping well with the situation.'

'Hm. He wouldn't let you know if he wasn't.'

'What do you mean?'

'You'd have to know Lucius pretty well before he'd ever let you see any weakness.'

Hermione cast him a speculative glance, but refrained from asking the obvious question. 'He does seem to like having people around,' she said instead.

A brief look of surprise crossed Severus' face. 'It is that obvious? He's a bit lonely now that Narcissa's moved out and Draco's got his own family.'

'Once this is over, I'm sure there'd be any number of women who'd be happy to keep Lucius company.'

'He may not want any number of women. Especially not the kind who would be attracted by his alleged reputation of perpetual Death Eater.'

Was it just her impression or had Severus' tone soured?

'Shame. One more reason to get him cleared of the current accusation.'

'If only to get him some female company.' Severus' voice sounded decidedly icy.

This time, they passed the gates without incident.

'Goodnight, Severus.' Hermione wondered if she'd get away with another kiss, and then decided what the hell and reached up and pressed her mouth to Severus'. His lips felt warm and surprisingly soft. She pulled back, holding his gaze.

Severus' hand came up, and his fingers traced along her jawbone, her temple and down the side of her neck. Hermione could feel his touch all through her body; her heart started to beat considerably faster while she kept looking at Severus and closed the distance to his mouth again. He responded by trailing his tongue over her bottom lip, causing a little sigh to escape from her. His other hand sneaked around her back, drawing her nearer to him. She pressed herself even closer to his warm body while their tongues became very well acquainted with each other.

Hermione didn't want the kiss to stop, and it was very nice having Severus so close, but it wasn't close enough. She wrapped her arms firmly around him, closed her eyes and concentrated on the image of her bedroom.

A fraction of a moment later, they were standing on the edge of her bed, their mouths still locked. The change in surroundings and the sensation of Apparition had obviously registered with Severus as he broke the kiss and looked at her, one eyebrow wandering in the direction of his hairline. Hermione wriggled against him. 'It's more comfortable than outside, don't you think?'

'Indeed,' he replied and closed the distance between their mouths again.

Both shrugged out of their cloaks without breaking the kiss, though Hermione nearly stumbled over the bundle of fabric as Severus was manoeuvring her towards the bed. They tumbled onto the mattress in a tangle of limbs. His hand wandered under her robes, stroking her back and shoulder, sending pleasant little shivers through Hermione that pooled in her lower belly.

She tilted her head sideways, intending to kiss along his jaw. Instead her nose made contact with Severus' much larger one. 'Ow,' she said, then started to grin.

'Sorry.' Severus looked sufficiently apologetic, but the corners of his mouth were tilting upwards, too.

Hermione placed a kiss on his nose while her hand proceeded to open Severus' robes. She sighed when she could finally feel his bare skin. After having ascertained that her nose was elsewhere, Severus started to place little kisses along the side of her neck before he started to nibble at her earlobe. His hand was now exploring her breast, sending more shivers through her and producing another sigh. Hermione let her hands roam over his back, and down to his bottom and then to his front. She wrapped her hand around him and started to stroke him. Severus felt perfect in her hand, and judging by the noises he was making, he rather seemed to like it, too.

Hermione pressed herself against him, wanting to feel more of him. There were definitely too many layers of cloth between them. Reluctantly, she stopped her explorations and started to tug at his robes to get them off. Severus seemed to be in agreement as he tried to divest her of her own clothes at the same time. It took a bit of rather undignified fumbling and almost falling off the bed before they finally got rid of their clothing.

Finally naked, they just lay there for a moment, catching their breath until Severus pulled Hermione on top of him, his mouth searching hers again. His naked body felt wonderful beneath her; nothing existed but their kiss, his smell and his arms around her. She could feel Severus' hand gliding between her legs, her body turning to liquid fire at his touch.

Hermione spread her legs further and glided onto him, enjoying the way he filled her. She met his thrusts when he started to push upward and felt the heat building inside her until her world drowned in sensation.

Five

Chapter 5 of 6

Hermione finds out that appearances can be deceptive when Lucius Malfoy needs her help to get out of Azkaban. And why is Severus Snape so interested in Malfoy's case?

Many thanks to my wonderful beta melusin and my lovely alpha readers chivalric and savine_snape.

Books must be treated with respect, we feel that in our bones, because words have power. Bring enough words together they can bend space and time.

~ Terry Pratchett

~~~^~~~

*Severus' fingers drew lazy patterns on her naked arse, causing pleasant tingles to spread through her body. The sun was nicely warm on her back; she could hear the waves lapping gently on the shore, as a soft wind caused tiny clouds of sand to rain on the grimoire she was reading. Hermione blew them away and looked up to see Lucius walking toward them, all tanned, wearing nothing but the tray with glasses of white wine that he was carrying. A glass of chilled wine seemed like a really nice idea. And maybe something to nibble on?*

*The beach idyll was suddenly interrupted by an incessant beeping sound.*

Hermione's eyes opened slowly to the familiar surroundings of her bedroom. The annoying noise was still there. Her sleepy brain identified it as her alarm clock, but her routine movement to switch it off was stopped by an obstacle in her bed. She turned around and found herself nose to nipple with a male chest. A big smile spread over her face as she snuggled closer to said chest, reaching over the rest of Severus to switch off the alarm.

'About time,' A voice above her head grunted.

'Mmmmh,' mumbled Hermione, burrowing her face into Severus' chest.

'Hermione.'

'Mmmmh.'

'Was there a reason for that infernal noise at this ungodly hour?'

Her head came up sharply at his tone, a lump of fear suddenly in her chest.

'I need to go to work.'

'Now?'

'No, I usually set the alarm early so that I have enough time to get ready.'

'Hmph.'

He sounded more tired than anything else, but the eyes staring into hers were unfathomable. The lump started to rise to her throat. She drew a deep breath and placed a tiny kiss on his collarbone.

In response, he drew her closer to him, and his hand started to wander down her back.

Warm relief swept through Hermione, quickly followed by desire as Severus' hand started to do the most interesting things. She took that as a cue to start some exploring of her own. Judging by the noises he made, Severus approved.

~~~^~~~

Hermione was late for work again, but she didn't care. The plan was to spend the morning, or what was left of it, at her office and then join Severus at Malfoy Manor to go through the rest of Lucius' books, hoping that they would provide a clue.

Severus... A huge grin spread over Hermione's face.

She was still grinning when she practically floated into the chambers of Granger and Patil, and Megan passed her a mug full of steaming black coffee plus a stack of parchments.

'Good weekend, was it?' she asked.

'Yes, excellent. Thank you. Anything else?'

'The Minister wants to see you. Now.'

Hermione stopped on the way to her office. 'That's a bit unusual. Did he say what about?'

Megan shook her head. 'No, he said, and I quote, "Tell her to get her arse over here now".'

Hermione narrowed her eyes, annoyance warring with curiosity. 'I'd better find out what he wants, then.' She said, handing both the cup and the parchments back to Megan before she turned on her heels and Flooed to the Ministry.

Obviously, she was expected as she could get right through to Kingsley's office.

Hermione stepped from the Floo, brushed the soot off her robes and glared at the Minister. 'There'd better be a good reason for this.'

'Morning, Hermione.' Kingsley motioned to a seat in front of his desk.

She briefly contemplated to remain standing, but then sat down at the edge of the chair. Kingsley pushed a piece of parchment, encased in a clear plastic folder, towards her. 'This arrived at our house by owl yesterday. Addressed to Narcissa.'

Remember Andromeda? You're next.

Predictably, there was no signature.

Hermione felt her blood go cold. 'I take it you've shown this to MLE?'

'Yes. Fairly cheap, standard parchment you can buy in any stationery shop around here; handwriting has been altered by magic, magical trace not on record.'

'And the owl?'

'An ordinary screech owl. Took off as soon as Narcissa had taken the parchment.'

'Fuck. I'm sorry, Kingsley. How is Narcissa?'

'Shaken, but coping. The house is under surveillance, anyway, and we've alerted the Aurors to keep an eye on her.' Kingsley sounded calmer than he looked.

Hermione looked at the parchment again. 'Why are you telling me this?'

'MLE wants to question Lucius Malfoy again. They're going to send Aurors to Malfoy Manor.'

'They can't do that without informing me.'

'Oh, they will let you know. Only, you know how it is, the owl might lose its way and arrive late,' Kingsley stated matter-of-factly.

Hermione stared at him. 'Are you saying what I think you're saying?'

Kingsley looked back at her, neither confirming nor denying what Hermione had just implied.

'They're barking up the wrong tree. And the longer they waste their time hassling Lucius, the longer the real culprit will go free.'

Kingsley nodded. 'I know. Despite everything, Lucius would never attack Narcissa. The problem is that you and I are currently the only people in this building who believe that Lucius Malfoy is innocent, and we can't really prove it.'

'When did you say the letter arrived again?'

'Yesterday afternoon. Why?'

'Because Lucius has an alibi for that time. He was with his son and grandson. And I saw him yesterday evening as well.' No need to mention Severus at the moment.

'Not good enough. He could have slipped out any time to send the owl,' Kingsley pointed out. 'And you know Diggory tends to get a bit over-excited when he thinks he's about to catch a former Death Eater stepping out of line.'

Hermione sighed. 'I suppose I'd better go and make sure my client doesn't get shipped off to Azkaban again.'

'You'd better. And you'll need a bloody good strategy for the trial.'

'Tell me something I don't know,' Hermione said. 'Thank you, Kingsley.'

~~~^~~~

Hermione made a brief detour to her office to leave a note for Padma and gather her case files before she went to Malfoy Manor.

Basky let her into the library where she found Severus and Lucius busy going through a pile of books. Despite her worries, she noticed that the two looked good, reading side by side. 'Have you heard?' she greeted them.

'Good morning, Miss Granger. It is a pleasure...'

'Have we heard what?' Severus interrupted.

'Narcissa has received a threatening letter,' Hermione replied. 'And Aurors are on their way to talk to you.'

Lucius turned even paler than usual. 'They can't revoke my bail, can they?'

'No. Not unless they have new evidence, which they don't.'

Basky chose that moment to appear in the library. 'The gates say there's two intruders,' he announced.

Lucius sighed. 'That'll be my interrogators. Make them show you their badges, and then lead them into the blue parlour. Miss Granger and I will meet them there momentarily.'

Basky bowed and Disapparated.

'Severus, it might be best if you stayed here,' Hermione suggested. 'No need to let the MLE know that we have you on our side.'

'Actually, I thought Mrs Shackbolt might appreciate the visit of an old friend in her time of distress,' Severus answered.

Lucius nodded. 'I think she might. You know how to activate the Floo in my study, don't you? Go before the Ministry's lackeys get here.'

'I'll see you later, then.' Severus briefly put a hand on Lucius' shoulder before he hurried out of the room.

By unspoken agreement, Lucius and Hermione lingered until they were sure that the Aurors had not only arrived, but had been kept waiting for a sufficient time.

The two Aurors had taken their seats on high-backed chairs that were clearly intended for representation, not for comfort, in a room that had been designed to impress. They jumped to their feet when Hermione entered the room, followed by Lucius, and one of them put a hand on his wand, but neither bothered to introduce himself.

They didn't look pleased to see Hermione. 'Miss Granger. You received our owl,' the other said.

'Morning, gentlemen. No, I had an appointment with my client, anyway.'

'Mr Malfoy, where were you yesterday between three and seven pm?' The first Auror had obviously decided to ignore her.

'May I remind you that my client is under house arrest, so this question is superfluous. Secondly, my client is not going to answer any questions before you've stated the reason for your presence here.' Hermione fixed a beady eye on the two Aurors, who started to look a bit uncomfortable.

'Mrs Shackbolt received a threatening letter by owl yesterday afternoon.'

'And how does a random threatening letter relate to my client?'

'The letter referred to the attack on Mrs Lovegood and stated that your ex-wife would be next.' The shorter looked at Lucius like he was a particularly nasty blob of flubberworm mucus.

Hermione quelled an urge to direct one of the more unpleasant hexes at the man. She asked, 'Is there anything in that letter that would link it to my client?'

'Well, no.'

'So I fail to see the reason for your presence here, gentlemen. Besides, he does have an alibi as his son and grandson spent yesterday afternoon with him.'

'We'll check that.'

'You do that. We've answered your questions, and now I must ask you to leave. Otherwise, I'll be forced to file a complaint against your department for hassling my client.'

Both Aurors looked mutinous, but obviously knew better than to argue with Hermione.

'We'll find our own way out,' one of them grumbled.

'That won't be necessary. Basky, please escort these gentlemen back to the gates,' Lucius said.

When the Aurors were out of sight and earshot, both Lucius and Hermione let out a sigh of relief. Hermione felt slightly queasy. She had acquired a certain reputation at the Wizengamot, but this was the first time she had confronted two of the wizarding world's finest outside the courtroom.

Lucius looked a bit green around the gills, too. 'That could have gone a lot worse. Well done, Miss Granger.'

'Thank you. And fortunately, you did have an alibi this time.'

'One should always have an alibi,' he paused. 'I don't know about you, but I could do with a Brandy after this.'

'That sounds good.'

~~~~~

They had settled with their glasses back in the library. Hermione took a sip and felt the soothing effect as the smooth liquid ran down her throat. Lucius was swirling the amber liquid in his tumbler before he too took a sip.

Hermione pulled one of the books towards her and started to flick through it. After she'd read the same sentence for the third time and still didn't know what it said, she snapped the book shut. 'The trouble is that we don't really know what exactly we're looking for.'

'Maybe we missed the pivotal clue,' Lucius suggested.

'Maybe. Or someone could have modified an existing curse.' Hermione opened another book and snapped it shut again. 'You may have to face trial, after all.'

'I'm not going back to Azkaban,' Lucius said.

'You won't have to,' Hermione replied, briefly laying her hand on his arm. Their eyes met, and she realised that she genuinely wanted him to be free. 'Let's try this from a different angle. Who might bear a grudge against the Black sisters?'

'I can think of a couple of people who aren't too fond of Narcissa. Those who didn't agree with her actions at the end of the war, those who wanted to see her in prison, those who don't like that she married the current Minister for Magic. And the petty and jealous ones. Once, Narcissa's word was law in wizarding society. Or her whisper.'

'That makes for a rather long list of people, but I doubt that any of them would have a grudge against Andromeda.' Hermione made a few notes on a piece of parchment. 'The only overlapping points would be those who think both women are traitors. Which leads us right back to the Death Eaters.' She slapped her quill down.

'I thought we were searching for something that would help to exonerate me,' Lucius observed.

'We must be overlooking something.' Hermione looked at her parchment again, but it yielded no more clues than it had a minute ago.

Severus came striding into the room, his travelling cloak over his arm, Basky hurrying after him.

'How is Narcissa?' asked Lucius.

'As well as can be expected. She says she knows you've got nothing to do with the whole sordid affair because you'd never resort to such crude methods,' Severus replied.

'It's good to know that her faith in me hasn't diminished.'

Basky had finally managed to relieve Severus of his cloak and disappeared again.

'Anything that will help us?' Hermione asked.

Severus helped himself to a glass of brandy before he replied, 'There is one really interesting thing. The skin of her fingertips shows the residue of a potion.'

'Why wasn't this discovered before?'

'Because nobody looked for it. I came across it when I performed a thorough scan for magical traces.' Severus looked smug.

'Any idea what the potion does?' Hermione had started to make more notes on the parchment.

'It's nearly impossible to do a precise analysis if you have only residues on human skin,' Severus explained, 'But from what I could detect, I'd say it's some sort of enhancer or modifier for a spell.'

'Which has just made our search even more difficult,' Lucius observed.

'Not necessarily,' Severus objected. 'There aren't that many spells that require a potion to work, and nearly all of them are Dark in nature, so they'd be found in very specific grimoires.'

'So Narcissa would have come into contact with the potion through the letter?' Hermione asked. 'Which means, the parchment must have been impregnated with the potion and then dried.'

Severus nodded. 'Yes, which isn't hard to do, once one has acquired the potion.'

'Would it help if we analysed the parchment?' Lucius suggested.

'Probably. Unfortunately, MLE is keeping all evidence under lock and key. I could demand to see it, though.' Hermione continued, 'However, I wouldn't be allowed to take my wand, and I can't run an analysis without it.'

'Did Andromeda receive a threatening letter as well?' Severus asked.

'There's no mention of a letter in the files, but since she couldn't be questioned, she might have.' Another thought crossed Hermione's mind. 'But then it wouldn't have to be a letter, would it?' She looked at Severus. 'From what you said, a lot of items could be impregnated with that potion.'

Severus nodded. 'Any piece of paper, really.'

'So it would have been easy to slip her something poisoned?'

Severus nodded again.

'So the curse works only in connection with the potion, and the potion is a way to mark one's victim. Nifty, but pretty horrible.' Hermione shivered.

'Yes, but good for us. It's old magic and, as I said, there are very few books that detail that sort of spell, and even fewer people who have access to them,' Severus pointed out.

Lucius had become very quiet. He kept twirling a strand of his hair around a finger while Severus and Hermione were talking.

'Lucius?' Severus asked.

'I know where you'd find that kind of spell,' he whispered.

Hermione stared at him. 'Don't tell me...'

'Come with me.' Lucius rose, took out his wand and walked to the shelf next to the fireplace, Severus and Hermione trailing after him.

He wove an intricate pattern with his wand, murmuring a series of spells Hermione didn't understand. For a moment, nothing happened, then the shelf swung forward, revealing a small cabinet in the wall that contained another bookshelf. After another spell, Lucius took out a very ancient looking book.

'Are those all Dark Arts books?' Hermione's fingers were itching to investigate.

Lucius smiled. 'Oh no, there are quite a few that are of a rather different nature, but equally delicate.'

Hermione stared at him for a moment until the Knut dropped.

'Oh.' Her desire to investigate was now fuelled further by a couple of rather interesting images in her head. She pushed these images away in order to concentrate on their current problem.

After Lucius had closed and warded the cabinet again, he brought the book over to the table and opened it. It was hand-written, illustrated with coloured engravings, and quite obviously a spell book. Lucius leafed through it until he'd found the chapter he was looking for.

Severus and Hermione bent over the page, reading through the description of spells.

On the next page, they found the *Animus Translucidus* spell, which described exactly the effects Andromeda had suffered and required a potion to work.

'Shit,' said Severus.

Hermione stared at the page, the carefully crafted letters blurring before her eyes. She had the feeling the floor was spinning beneath her. If anyone found out that Lucius had this book, there was no way he wouldn't be convicted. Her brain came up with any number of unlikely scenarios to get him out of the country to a safe place until a more sensible thought elbowed the panic out of the way. 'There must be others,' she said.

'Other what?' Lucius asked.

'Books. I mean copies of this book. Please, tell me this isn't the only copy in existence.'

Lucius looked thoughtful. 'I think there were three originally. All made exclusively for the Malfoy family.'

The rest of Hermione's hope waved goodbye and left the country.

'I know that one was destroyed in a fire, then there's this one and... Hm, I wonder what became of the third.' Lucius went over to another shelf that contained a long row of similar looking books. 'Let me check the inventory.' He started to go through the volumes, anxiously watched by Severus and Hermione. Without noticing it, she had

grasped Severus' hand.

'Ah, it appears the book was given to my great-great-great aunt as a wedding gift.' Lucius looked puzzled. 'Odd, I wasn't aware of that branch of the family...unless...'

Lucius wandered over to yet another shelf and pulled out a large black book. 'Aha, they had only one daughter. She married a Bulstrode.' He scanned the page further, murmuring, 'Aha.' He turned to Severus and Hermione. 'If the book was indeed passed along as an heirloom, as it should have been, it would be in the Diggory family by now.'

Stunned silence spread through the room.

'So that would make Amos Diggory our suspect? I don't find that very likely,' Hermione said.

'Hm,' said Severus. 'Let's not dismiss that possibility quite so quickly.'

'Especially as he's our only option,' Lucius added. 'So what do we know about the family?' He looked expectantly at Hermione.

'Diggory is a widower. Lost his wife shortly after the war, in a spell-related accident. It wasn't clear whether it was really an accident or whether she killed herself because she couldn't get over the death of her son. Currently Head of MLE: has a reputation of being strict, but fair, if a bit over-zealous when it comes to former Death Eaters and their families.' Hermione thought about what else she knew. 'Oh, and there was an incident a few years back at the MLE's Christmas party when he got completely pissed and had a go at Harry for testifying in favour of Narcissa.' She added, 'You know, when Harry was still working as an Auror.'

'What if he has nourished that grudge against Narcissa?' Severus asked.

'I'd say we've got our culprit.' Lucius sounded more like himself again.

'Not unless we can prove it,' Hermione cautioned. 'We'd have to find a way to question him.'

'Why don't we have lunch,' Lucius suggested. 'I'm sure between us we can come up with a plan to convince Mr Diggory to admit to his crimes.'

~~~~~

Four days later, Amos Diggory was sitting in his usual corner in the Leaky, staring into his usual pint, when a shadow fell across his table.

'Mr Diggory?'

Diggory looked up at the dark stranger. He was sure he'd never seen him before, but after a pint or three things tended to get a bit blurry. 'Yeah?'

'Dearborn, Peter Dearborn. May I?'

Diggory nodded. Both men silently sipped their pints until Dearborn said. 'I admire your work.'

'Huh?'

'At the MLE. Takes a firm conviction to deal with the scum.'

Diggory shrugged. 'S'pose so. Thanks.' He drained the rest of his beer in one swig.

'Let me buy you a drink.'

It took Dearborn a while to get back from the busy bar, but he eventually sat down with their pints. 'To justice.' He raised his glass.

'To justice.'

Dearborn watched as Diggory drank from his pint in great gulps.

'It's a shame so many Death Eaters got away after the war,' Dearborn said.

'We'll get them. Eventually, we'll get them all.'

'Though sometimes it takes a helping hand, doesn't it, Mr Diggory?'

Diggory stared at him. 'N...Yes.'

'And you're happy to provide that helping hand, aren't you?'

'What the...They deserve what's coming to them.' Diggory looked suspiciously at his glass. 'Did you spike my beer?'

'Did you curse Andromeda Lovegood?'

'Was an accident. Meant to get Narcissa Shacklebolt. She was late for tea. Bitch. But I'll get her, all of them.' Diggory tried to stand up, but Dearborn put a firm hand on his arm.

'You don't want to cause a scene.'

Diggory could feel Dearborn's wand poking his side. 'Who are you?'

'Did you set up Lucius Malfoy?'

'I...Yes. Justice. My son and wife are dead because of scum like him. So if he's caught cursing his ex-wife, he goes to Azkaban for the rest of his life. And I'll make sure it's a short and miserable one.' Diggory raised his hand in a helpless gesture, unable to stop the words spilling out of his mouth.

'Is there a counter-curse? Or an antidote?'

'Don't know. I don't care... Wha...' He never got to finish the sentence as his head met the tabletop.

Beneath the table, Dearborn pocketed his wand.

The middle-aged couple at the table next to them was about to leave, too. He nearly bumped into them on his way out through the crowded pub. He stopped at the bar. 'Can't hold his drink, poor chap. Make sure he gets home all right.' He indicated the unconscious Diggory and passed the barkeeper a Galleon.

~~~~~

By the time Lucius and Hermione had Flooed back to Malfoy Manor, Severus had already arrived and was waiting for them, sprawled out on the sofa in the drawing room, a

smug expression on his face.

'Well done, Mr Dearborn.' Hermione plopped down next to him.

'Good thing you just so happened to have one of the MLE's recording devices,' Severus replied.

'I must have forgotten to return it when I left the Department,' Hermione said innocently.

Lucius was inspecting his hands. 'I hate Polyjuice potion. One never feels like oneself.'

Severus rolled his eyes. 'I'm glad we're back to mundane concerns now that Azkaban can be safely avoided.' He looked at Hermione. 'He'll be cleared now, won't he?'

Hermione nodded. 'Yes, definitely. I'll take this directly to Kingsley tomorrow. With the record and three witnesses to Diggory's confession, even under Veritaserum, Lucius *will* be exonerated.'

'Diggory won't do anything stupid between now and tomorrow like carrying out the attack on Narcissa, will he?' Lucius asked.

Severus shook his head. 'Not after the Stunner I put on him. By the time he wakes up again tomorrow, he'll already be in custody.'

Lucius looked at them both. 'Thank you.'

'Just wait until you see my bill,' Hermione said with a smile.

Lucius shrugged. 'Meanwhile, can I offer you a glass of wine? I have an excellent Bordeaux from the Malfoy estate.'

He hadn't exaggerated. The wine was excellent, the sofa soft, the room pleasantly warm and Severus' side had never looked more inviting. As she leant against him, Severus put an arm around her.

The hand holding Lucius' wineglass stopped briefly on the way to his mouth as he looked from Severus to Hermione and back. He took a sip before he said with a smile, 'I see I'm not the only one who appreciates charming and intelligent company.'

'Intelligence and charm are always appreciated,' Hermione replied drowsily.

~~~~~

Hermione finished her sentence, signed the parchment and spelled it so that only the recipient could read it before she tied it to the owl's leg.

The owl safely on its way, she leant back in her chair and stretched her arms and neck.

'Looks like you could do with a massage,' said Severus' voice from the doorway.

Hermione started. 'How did you get in here?'

'I charmed my way past your secretary, saying I was the delivery boy.' He held up the bag in his hand.

'Hm, I'll need to have a word with Megan about letting strangers into my office,' she said with a wink. 'What's in there?'

'Lunch.' Severus opened the bag and put a couple of sandwiches, two bottles of water, two apples and two chocolate bars on Hermione's desk before he made himself comfortable in the chair in front of it.

'Excellent idea.' Hermione snatched an egg and cress sandwich. 'And chocolate, you brought chocolate.' She quickly stopped herself before she said something silly.

'I thought you could do with some,' Severus said, indicating the files on her desk.

'I can always do with chocolate,' Hermione replied with a grin.

'How did it go with Kingsley?'

'He went down to MLE in person after he'd seen the evidence and sent a couple of Aurors to Diggory's house. Apparently, he was still out of it when they arrived to arrest him.'

'Some people shouldn't drink.'

'Exactly. The grimoire was found in Diggory's house, and he's in custody now. All accusations against Lucius have been formally withdrawn. He's officially a free man again. Case closed.' The warm glow of satisfaction she'd felt since last night was still spreading through her.

'Good. Any news about Andromeda?' Severus asked.

'The Unspeakables are on it. Now that they have the book with the actual curse and potion, they're optimistic that they'll find a cure.' Hermione added, 'I really hope they do.'

Severus nodded. They were still munching their sandwiches in peaceful silence when an eagle owl pecked at the window. Hermione frowned. 'Silly owl. They're supposed to go to Megan's window.'

Severus peered at the owl. 'I think this one has more of a personal message for you.'

Hermione went to open the window. The owl fluttered down onto her desk and stuck out its leg. There was a small parcel and a parchment, both of which bore the Malfoy crest. 'How did you know?'

'Hardly anyone except Lucius uses those owls. What is it?'

Hermione had unrolled the parchment. 'He's inviting us to a celebratory dinner on Friday, and he's sent me a little token of his gratitude.'

She started to unwrap the small parcel, which had started to enlarge when she touched it. It was a book: ancient by the looks of it, but very well preserved, bound in dark leather and engraved with runes. As Hermione started to decipher the runes, her heart started to beat a little faster. She opened the book at a random page and found herself looking at a drawing of three people, a woman and two men, entwined in a passionate embrace. She watched them, feeling a blush spreading over her face and neck as their interaction became more heated.

She pushed the open book towards Severus. He looked at the drawing. 'Lucius, you sly devil.'

'It is a beautiful picture,' Hermione observed.

'I'm sure that's the reason why Lucius sent it. So that we could admire the drawings.'

'My thoughts exactly. I'm sure it is pure coincidence that it arrived together with the invitation for next Friday.'

'Do you want to go?'

'Do you?'

Severus shrugged. 'The food at Malfoy Manor is excellent.'

'I'll take that as a yes.' Hermione quickly penned an acceptance note while the owl helped itself to the bacon and chicken bits from the remaining sandwiches.

After the owl had left, she unwrapped one of the chocolate bars and saw Severus looking at her speculatively. 'What?'

'He fancies you.'

'I don't think I'm the only one he fancies.'

'Does it bother you?'

'What? That he fancies me? Or you? Or possibly both of us?'

'Yes.'

'No, it doesn't. Unless you plan to bugger off with Lucius.'

'Don't be silly.'

'Remember what I told you about calling me silly?'

'That's hardly the point.'

'Then what is?'

Severus played with the rest of his sandwich until he had reduced it to a heap of crumbs. 'You, me, Lucius,' he finally said. 'Who do you want?'

Hermione could feel her heart beating in her throat. She swallowed and drew a deep breath. 'Do I have to choose?'

Severus stared at her. 'Sorry?'

'Do I have to choose between you?'

'Yes, I thought that was what you said.' He paused. 'Not as far as Lucius or I are concerned.'

Hermione narrowed her eyes. 'You two wouldn't have had a conversation about this, would you?'

Severus had the grace to try and look sheepish. He didn't succeed too well.

'Just exactly how friendly are you two with each other?'

'Why don't you find out for yourself?'

'I think it's going to be a very interesting evening on Friday.'

## Epilogue

### Chapter 6 of 6

Hermione finds out that appearances can be deceptive when Lucius Malfoy needs her help to get out of Azkaban. And why is Severus Snape so interested in Malfoy's case?

*It's still magic even if you know how it's done.*

~ Terry Pratchett

~~~^~~~

Rain was pouring down outside the French windows, causing little rivulets of water to run down the glass and leaving puddles on the terrace. Hermione snuggled deeper into her armchair and continued reading *Fifteenth Century Magical Paintings: a New Look*.

She didn't know how long she had been lost in her book when her attention was caught by Severus drawing a sharp breath. Hermione looked up to see the book he'd been reading, *The Singular Case of the Three Warlocks*, forgotten in his lap. She followed his line of vision; apparently, Lucius had meanwhile come in and installed himself on the sofa. That wasn't the reason for Severus' reaction, though.

Hermione watched as Lucius scooped up a generous spoonful from the bowl of mousse au chocolat he was holding. He brought the spoon to his mouth, twirling the tip of his tongue around it to lick off a little at the top. Then he proceeded to suck off the rest of the sweet until he had caught every bit of it.

Seemingly oblivious to their transfixed stares, he dipped his spoon into the bowl again and repeated the slow, sensual way of doing most interesting things to the spoon. Only then did he look up, smiling at them. 'Would you like some?'

Severus was over on the sofa in one swift motion. Looking at Lucius, he dipped his finger into the bowl, scooping up a bit of mousse. He started to lick it off, his eyes never leaving Lucius'. When he had finished, he dipped his finger into the bowl again, but this time he brought it to Lucius' lips. Hermione swallowed as Lucius' tongue darted out

and swiped the mousse off Severus' finger.

Lucius kept Severus' finger in his mouth for a moment before he let go and covered the other wizard's mouth with his own.

Hermione sighed, heat spreading from her centre through her body as she watched the erotic display of the two men kissing. Hands were starting to disappear into robes, just as her own hand was creeping between her legs.

She could feel Severus' gaze on her as he broke the kiss with Lucius. His eyes roamed over her body, his smile indicating that he knew exactly where her hand was. Now, Lucius had turned to look at her, too. 'Why don't you come over here so that we can assist you?' he purred.

Her body agreed that joining the two men on the sofa would be a very nice idea indeed.

'Budge up,' she said as she wriggled between them.

Lucius scraped up the last of the chocolate mousse and fed it to her from his finger. It tasted sweet and smooth. Hermione kept his finger in her mouth after she had licked the mousse off, swirling her tongue around his tip. Lucius gave a little moan. Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione noticed that Lucius robes had fallen open and that Severus' hand was firmly wrapped around his length.

She was distracted by the feeling of two hands, one stroking her breast, the other her belly before it moved downwards between her legs. This time the moan was hers before her mouth met Lucius'. He tasted of chocolate and a heady, utterly intoxicating, mixture of Severus and himself. Time seemed to stop, and the world narrowed to the perfect combination of Lucius' mouth and Severus' hands.

Hermione had no idea how much time had passed until she disengaged her mouth from Lucius' and placed a series of kisses on his neck and collarbone before paying attention to his nipples. Severus had started to do very interesting things with his mouth on her neck. Hermione sighed around one rosy nipple, which perked up with interest. Then she kissed her way further down, following a path of blond hair, until she reached her goal. She pressed a kiss to Severus' knuckles before she swirled her tongue around Lucius' tip. Severus moved his hand to caress her back, and she had Lucius' cock all to herself; she took him into her mouth, alternatively licking and sucking, relishing the sounds he made.

Hermione could feel Severus' hands on her breasts. His fingertips took turns stroking and tweaking her nipples, causing her to gasp with pleasure around Lucius' cock.

She felt one of Severus' hands moving downwards again, stroking her between her legs, sending little trails of fire through her. She pushed back against his hand until she felt his fingers being replaced by something else. When he was fully inside her, he stilled. It felt good, but she wanted more so pushed back again. She could almost feel Severus' smug little smile at her impatience. She pushed once more. Severus' answer was one slow trust, making her moan as she continued to pay attention to Lucius. Apparently, her moan was what it took as Lucius bucked once, and hot liquid filled her mouth.

She slowly withdrew, placing a kiss on Lucius' cock before Severus pulled her closer to him and started to thrust in earnest. Soon, they found a rhythm which made Hermione forget everything except the sensations it created inside her body until she tumbled over the edge.

~~~~~

'You know, it's been nearly a year,' Hermione said while she was trying to find a more comfortable arrangement of limbs and cushions without having to move too much. Severus shifted a bit, so that she could place her head on his chest, while Lucius' fingers were tracing lazy patterns on her back.

'What has?' Severus asked, taking her hand into his.

Finally satisfied with the arrangement on the sofa, Hermione replied, 'Me putting up with you two. Oh, and us rescuing Lucius from a horrible fate, of course.'

Predictably, there was a 'hmpf' from Lucius at her choice of words. She smiled.

Severus' eyebrow raised an inch before its owner said, 'I believe the putting up is mutual. However, there are certain advantages to this arrangement.' He squeezed her hand. At her back, she could feel his other hand stroking Lucius' hip.

'Indeed,' Lucius agreed. 'By the way, I had a look through the more remote bookshelves the other day and found a most interesting little volume, which might prove beneficial for a little celebration on Saturday. What do you think?'

'That sounds acceptable,' Severus answered.

Hermione sighed contently, fully in agreement.

~fin~

---

A/N: This story was originally written as a gift for dream\_labyrinth in the sshg exchange 2011 on livejournal. Her prompt was *Lucius Malfoy is trying to get out of Azkaban. He applies to Hermione's sense of justice to get her to help him. (Weird Slytherin reasoning). Hermione gets Severus to help her, or he approaches her to help.*

Many thanks to my wonderful beta melusin and to my lovely alpha readers chivalric and savine\_snape.