

The Number Twelve House-Elf Detective Agency

by gingertart

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 6

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"I owe you a life debt," the wizard said tonelessly, holding his glass up to the light as if to admire the few drops of amber liquid that remained. "You've invited me back to Britain to call in the debt, haven't you?"

"That's right," Lucius Malfoy agreed, crossing one impeccably shod foot across the other and languidly Summoning a silver tray of bottles from the sideboard. "Do help yourself to another drink, old chap."

"What do you want me to do?"

Malfoy cocked his head and narrowed his cold grey eyes. "What, no indignant protestations? No righteous anger? Are you unwell?"

Severus Snape sighed and flicked his wand at the decanter, watching as it tipped a measure of single malt into his glass.

"Lucius, you saved my life!"

"To be strictly accurate, my house-elf saved your life, but yes, it was under my instructions."

"I therefore owe you a life debt and had no doubt that you would call upon my services eventually. What do you require of me?"

"I'd prefer if you didn't make it sound such a burden."

"I've really had enough of being in thrall to older and more powerful wizards."

"Severus, please! I resent being spoken of in the same breath as that pair of manipulative megalomaniacs."

"Somehow you still manage to sound flattered. Tell me what you need me to do."

"Something you always did supremely well."

"Brew potions?"

"Spy on someone."

Snape sipped his Glendronach and stared at the arrangement of silver-mauve roses in the fireplace.

"That sounds suspiciously easy. What's the catch?"

"Hm. Knowing your particular abilities, I don't think that it will be particularly gruelling. I would like you to keep an eye on a comely young witch for me, find out if she is getting up to anything that she shouldn't be. See if there is a lever I can use to... shall we say, persuade her to see things my way?"

"A witch? Are you losing your touch?"

Malfoys do not pout, but Lucius came damn close.

"Believe me, if I thought I could win Miss Iron Knickers over with a good dinner and a couple of bottles of champagne, I would. We have a history, shall we say. Plus, there is the intriguing appearance in my Foe-Glass of a house-elf wearing clothes."

"A free elf? I believe that there have been a few of those around since the war, working for Wizarding shops and businesses. Are you sure it wasn't simply delivering groceries?"

"Not wearing a deerstalker hat and wielding a magnifying glass."

"You'd better tell me everything."

So Malfoy did.

A peacock roosting upon the terrace was startled into flight by the subsequent roar of laughter that issued from the open windows of the parlour.

Ron Weasley, Auror, best friend and side-kick of the Boy Who Lived Twice and all-round good guy, bounded up the steps of the old townhouse in Grimmauld Place and rapped on the brass plate that stated, in Times New Roman, "The Number Twelve House-Elf Detective Agency."

A house-elf opened the door, stuck her head out level with Ron's hip and stared up at him.

"Hello, Winky," he said cheerfully.

"I is no longer Winky," the elf squeaked. "I is Miss Marple, and I is thanking you to remember that."

"Oh," said Ron, "right. Has Hermione been letting you lot watch her old detective videos again?"

"We has been learning about being proper detectives," Miss Marple assured him as she let him into the hall. "I is leaving you with Kojak. I is doing the filing with Brother Cadfael."

A male elf leaned against the panelling. He wore a little pair of dark grey trousers and a jacket, although the suave effect was rather ruined by the bare feet and the way his sunglasses slid off his face every time his ears twitched. He was sucking on a lollipop. He looked up at Ron, switched the lollipop from one side of his mouth to the other and said, "Who loves ya, baby?" in a muffled squeak.

"Is Hermione in?" he asked.

Kojak's ears swivelled automatically towards Ron, forcing the elf to catch his sunglasses as they fell off completely.

"Miff Hermione iff in..." He removed the lollipop and banished it. "Miss Hermione is in her office, Master Ron. Is I to be taking you up?"

"No, it's fine, you get on with whatever you were doing."

"I is wondering," the elf said, "if the Aurors' offices needs detecting elves. We is getting very good at the detecting; we is enjoying it. We asks if the Ministry has a house-elf Auror division."

"That's, um, very good," Ron said. "You'll have to ask Harry about an elf division, though."

"Master Ron, was Mister Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson really doing all that hot stuff when they was not detecting?"

"I'm not sure about that. I haven't read much Muggle detective fiction, actually." Ron edged towards the staircase. "I'll just go on up and see Hermione, okay?"

Hermione Granger was in conversation with a house-elf wearing a trench coat and fedora. He, or possibly she, slouched past Ron, then paused in the doorway.

"We is packin' magic," the elf declared, "and we ain't afraid to use it." It snapped its fingers and vanished with a pop.

"Sam Spade again?" Ron asked, after a moment of contemplative silence.

"Philip Marlowe."

He nodded.

"Hermione..."

"I know," she sighed. "Have a seat. I was going to have a cup of tea, d'you want one?"

"Yeah, that'd be good. You've created a monster."

"They can't help it." She waved her wand at the kettle, which began to whistle and chase the tea-pot in circles on the tea trolley. "You remember what Kreacher was like when we first met him, don't you?"

"A complete git?"

"Totally prejudiced against Muggles and Muggle-borns, not to mention depressed and miserable."

"He was bloody rude and uncooperative, I remember that much."

"He took the Blacks as his role models and copied his Mistress, even though she was only present in that ghastly portrait. Then when he adapted to having the three of us as his family, he became much nicer, and now that he's looking after Ginny and Harry and the baby, he's turned into a really sweet old thing. Elves take on the character of the household that they live in."

"What about Dobby, then? He was a Malfoy elf."

"He was a rebel, wasn't he?" Hermione smiled fondly. "Bless him; he was an exception, that's why he and Malfoy hated each other. I think he might have been very bright, actually. He thought for himself instead of following the party line. The elves here are all free elves, but they feel lost and lonely unless they're part of a family, so they've taken on the personae of literary detectives as their way of making the agency into a distinctive group, their own family with its customs and little quirks."

"You admit they don't all want to be freed, then? Finally given up on S.P.E.W.?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I was a child. I still believe that they should be given the choice, but if they're happy and secure in good homes, who am I to tell them what to do? The agency is a way of making the free elves feel useful and needed."

"You're dead eccentric, you know that, don't you? Brilliant, but eccentric."

"Says the man who married Luna Lovegood," Hermione said, but softened her words with a fond smile. The kettle finally cornered the teapot between the sugar bowl and biscuit tin and poured boiling water into it. "How is Luna?"

"Expanding, glowing and generally looking forward to motherhood. She sends her love, by the way, and an invitation to Sunday lunch, and if you don't turn up by twelve, she'll set her Flimpitters on you. Not that I've ever seen a Flimpitter, but she tells me they're terrifyingly pink and sparkly."

The teapot stood up on little legs and bowed, spilling a stream of fragrant tea into each of two mugs. A brown pottery jug scuttled to add milk, and the sugar tongs threw a cube of sugar into one mug, turned towards Ron, paused, then tossed in another two lumps for good measure before the mug floated across the office and settled on the desk in front of him.

"I don't do pink and sparkly," Hermione said.

"You'd better come to lunch on Sunday, then, hadn't you? And you aren't backing out of lunch down at the Leaky with Harry today, are you?"

"Of course I'm coming to lunch. I suspect you didn't just come to collect me, though, did you?"

"No," Ron sighed. "We're not sure if we've got a problem."

"Do you need another unofficial investigation?"

"Something like that, yeah. Your elves don't attract as much attention as Aurors."

"Go on, then, tell your Auntie Hermione."

"Lucius Malfoy's up to something. One of my team overheard Draco telling his wife that his dad was keeping a secret that he didn't want to get out."

Hermione picked up a quill and twirled it between her fingers, staring at the tip as it dipped and swirled through the air.

"I know."

"You do? Do you know exactly what?"

"I've got my suspicions."

Ron sat forward in his seat, his eyes glowing. "Are we going to get that slippery bastard locked up at last? Please tell me he's raising Inferi or smuggling Dark artefacts so we can nail him!"

Hermione's lips twitched.

"Have you ever heard of Wiltshire's Magic Wand?"

Ron looked blank. "Is that something to do with the Deathly Hallows?"

"Or Champion Wiltshire's Bright Aura, Champion Wiltshire's Scrumptious, Champion Sorcery Wizard's Potion of Wiltshire, Wiltshire's Top Totty or the great sire, Champion Wiltshire's Standing Ovation?"

"Haven't a clue. Hang on, are they his peacocks? He calls them daft names like that?"

"I doubt if he calls the peacocks anything. No, his hobby is breeding Crups top class pedigree Crups, apparently. He's well known in the fancy."

"There's no law against breeding Crups." Ron sounded regretful.

"No. However, he has been falsifying pedigrees."

"That's unlikely to get him sent to Azkaban. How do you know?"

"One of my customers showed me her new pup and its pedigree, which quoted the coat colours of its ancestors. It was bred by Malfoy; he owned most of the Crups on the pedigree, and it can't be correct."

"Why?"

"Simple genetics. Crups are like domestic dogs in many respects, including inheritance of coat colour. Black coats are dominant, so two liver parents can't possibly have produced a black pup unless there was a new mutation, which is highly unlikely... I've lost you, haven't I?"

Ron nodded and stuck his hands in his pockets. "I'll take your word for it. How d'you know all this stuff?"

"I looked it up, of course. Wizards don't understand genetics; it's a Muggle subject that they've never bothered with. Malfoy's a big wheel in the Crup Association of Great Britain. His pups fetch very high prices, and if this gets out, their pedigrees may not be worth the parchment they're written on. It appears that he has been secretly crossing Crups with Jack Russell terriers *Muggle* Jack Russell terriers. His pure-blood Crups are actually cross-bred mongrels. I got Sherlock to poke around at Malfoy Manor just out of interest."

Ron sniggered.

"Can I tell Rita Skeeter? Please?"

"That isn't ethical, Ron."

"Tempting, though," Ron sighed. "Malfoy doesn't do ethical so why should we? Are you sure that's all he's up to?"

"No, that's just all I know about. Sorry."

"Damn. I'd love to get him for something," Ron frowned. "Is that one of Crookshanks' pals?"

Hermione turned around in her seat to face the window, where a large, rather rangy black cat sat on the sill, glowering through the glass. She flicked her wand to open the casement.

"No, I've never seen that one before. Hello, boy, haven't you got a home to go to? D'you want to come in?"

The cat lifted a paw and licked it, studiously ignoring her.

"You can't stay there," Hermione told it. "You might fall off and hurt yourself."

"It's a cat; they always land on their feet," Ron said. "Shall I send it packing?" The cat lifted the sides of its lips, revealing the tips of two little kitty fangs. Hermione got up and went to the window, reaching out to the animal. The cat shot under her arm, bounded across the room and went to ground under her desk. "Oy!" Ron exclaimed and pointed his wand at it. "Get out of there!"

"Don't hurt it!"

"I'm not going to hurt it; I'm going to make sure it isn't an Animagus." He sighted along his wand and recited the spell to force an Animagus to revert to its human form. The cat clawed at the carpet but remained stubbornly feline. Ron holstered his wand.

"Just some manky old stray," he remarked and the cat growled as if in response.

Hermione opened the door and called, "Tolly? Are you busy?"

"Not being any Tolly here," an elf called back.

"Oh, sorry! Kojak, then. Have you got a minute?"

The house-elf bumped into the door as he pattered into the room.

"You want I should bust 'em, boss?"

"You don't have to wear dark glasses indoors, you know," Ron told him. Kojak glared over the top of his sunglasses.

"I is Kojak and Kojak wears shades." The elf pulled a red lollipop out of the air and stuck it firmly into the corner of his mouth, sucking audibly.

"Right. Well, can you please offer this cat some of Crookshank's food and a saucer of milk? Then I want you to draw up a report on everything we've got on Lucius Malfoy."

"And Draco," Ron said.

"But Draco hasn't done anything."

"Bet you he has," Ron said darkly. "He did in sixth year, didn't he? No-one believed Harry at the time, but it was Malfoy who let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts."

"Oh, very well. Kojak, make that everything we have on all three of the Malfoys, please."

"Yes, Miss Hermione, I is right on it." The elf popped out of the room.

"You coming to lunch, then?" Ron asked. "Harry'll be waiting for us by now."

"Yes, let's go." Hermione Summoned her cloak and purse, and Ron followed her out of the room.

In the dark space beneath the desk, the black cat stretched and rolled on the carpet for a while before clambering to its feet. It jumped lightly up onto Hermione's chair and peered at the neat row of box files on the shelf, then began nosing at the one labelled 'M'.

Lucius Malfoy strode across the stable yard, slapping a riding crop against his shiny leather boot in irritation. He was trailed by a house-elf leading a pair of excited young Crups on leashes and a wizard wearing a black travelling cloak and a scowl.

"Damn it, Severus, you've got to stop her! I've got Delilah Derwent bringing Champion ThreeWitches Pernickety to Magic Wand next week and Spode owed me only yesterday to book his best bitch to Potion for her next season. I desperately want to prove Potion; if he throws a decent litter I'll mate him to Scrumptious for her final litter and that will give me another line back to Ovation." He took a deep and steady breath. "Another blasted free elf has been hanging about my kennels, wearing sunglasses and a suit and sucking a lollipop, would you believe? If that that *Mudblood* goes to the press, my entire breeding programme will be in ruins."

"I wish you wouldn't use that term," Snape said in an icily clear voice. "I also suppose that her elves discovering that I am still alive doesn't particularly concern you."

"Should it?" Malfoy turned and stood with his fists on his hips. "My dear Severus, I'm happy to keep your existence a secret if you so desire, but I really don't see the point. Potter exonerated you, didn't he? Your reputation unlike mine is spotless; there's even an Order of Merlin somewhere with your name on it. I, on the other hand, stand to be thrown out of the Crup Association! My Crups will lose their show awards. No-one will allow me to use their dogs at stud or buy my pups. Look at her!"

He pointed to an athletic black Crup with a white blaze and star on her chest, who was standing on her hind legs at the fence of her pen and wagging furiously at her master.

"Junior Warrant holder, Wiltshire's Top Totty, pup of the year last year, best junior at the Association's championship show and already two-thirds of the way to her title. She's the best hunting Crup I've had for the last ten years, and I'm damned if I'll let the bastards demote her to the status of mongrel. She just might," he lowered his voice, "be the breed's next dual champion. Merlin's beard, what I'd give for that! It would put my breeding on the map for all time!"

"Perhaps you should have thought before using a Muggle terrier on your bitch."

"He had a conformation to die for," Malfoy muttered, "not to mention a terrific hunting drive. Seemed a shame to let prejudice stand in the way of the betterment of the breed."

Snape made a sound like a snort, but when his friend turned to face him again, he merely looked bored.

"Very well, what d'you expect me to do? I have no doubt that I could break into the house and destroy her files on you, but she'll simply replace them, get suspicious and dig even deeper."

"Can't you distract her?"

"How? Pretend to haunt the place? The redoubtable Miss Granger is hardly likely to be scared away by a haunting; she's more likely to call in her dear Auror friends, and then so much for me keeping a low profile."

"You could return from the dead stark naked in her bath."

"Piss off, Lucius."

"Only trying to be helpful. Portly, feed the pups and send the juniors out for a run in the paddock as usual. Tell Waspish that Aura is not to be allowed out with the males yet; she can be exercised with Scrumptious and Totty. That's all."

The elf bowed and led the Crups away. Malfoy tossed his riding crop into the tack room and flexed his back. "Hm, a hot bath isn't a bad idea, plus a glass of something warming. Come along, Severus."

Crookshanks settled himself on Hermione's lap. Without even raising the journal that she was reading, she reached to scratch him behind the ears in the place that made him turn from a cat into a limp noodle of purring bliss. Instead of Crookshanks' thick mane, her fingers encountered short, sleek fur. She allowed the *Journal of Applied Spells and Incantations* to slide to one side so that she could confirm that the black stray was indeed perched on her thighs. He appeared to be staring at an article on the effects of heating charms on the different metals used to make cauldrons.

"Are you someone's familiar?" she enquired. The cat merely blinked at her. "I'm only asking because you're not an Animagus and ordinary cats don't usually read magazines."

The cat reached out, hooked a claw into the journal and tugged, ripping a small tear in the paper. Hermione snatched it out of reach. "Hey, I haven't read that yet! Bad kitty!"

The cat said 'prrrrp' in a manner that sounded slightly rude and turned in a circle, treading the fabric of her robe before plopping down into a large, hot, black cushion on her thighs.

"You'll be in trouble when Crookshanks comes home," an amused tenor voice remarked from the doorway. The cat tensed, and Hermione automatically slid a hand down his silky back to reassure him.

"Hi, Harry. Have you come for the rent?"

"Of course I don't want the rent, you silly girl. I've told you a hundred times, you're welcome to use the old dump for as long as you want." He came into the room and sat down on the sofa.

"I'm running a business; I can't just stay for free."

"Why not? Ginny and I don't want to live here. I'd rather it wasn't left empty, and your elves keep everything shipshape."

"They're not 'my' elves; they're free elves."

Harry grinned, licked a finger and scored a figure one in the air. Hermione stuck out her tongue. "If it isn't about the rent, is this a social call?"

"Not really. I wondered how you're getting on with your investigation."

"Which one? We're tracking down an elderly witch who stands to inherit under her sister's will, evidence of adultery for a divorce case or the possible theft of valuables from a wizard who suspects his own nephew and doesn't want the Aurors involved. I can't tell you any more because of the client confidentiality clauses."

"Hermione! The Malfoy case, of course; Ron said you're looking into things at Malfoy Manor."

The cat's claws touched her thighs without pricking the skin, but she felt the tiny frisson that ran through him.

"Are you really that interested in Malfoy's shady Crup dealings?"

"Not in the slightest." Harry leaned forward and propped his elbows on his knees. He had his wand in his hand and rotated it between his fingers. "Something odd happened."

"Odd?"

"Yes, odd. You see, Draco's a very astute businessman."

"I never expected to hear you say Draco Malfoy was good at anything."

"Oh, he is. Lucius is passionate about his standing in society; Draco's more interested in running his businesses."

"He probably wants to prove himself without relying on his name alone."

"We all know that feeling, don't we?"

They shared a moment of silent empathy.

"What about Draco?"

"He owns a potions owl-order supply business, among others. Yesterday, he moved the head office from Diagon Alley to the *Île de Sorcellerie* in Paris."

"Oh."

"Yes, 'oh.' Who knew you were looking into the Malfoys?"

"Ron, you, me and three of my elves: Sherlock, Kojak and Miss Marple. The elves won't discuss anything with anyone outside this building unless instructed to do so you know how loyal they are. We used Silencing Charms in the pub, as always. Unless you told Ginny, or Ron told Luna?" Harry shook his head. "So, what's Draco hiding?"

"More to the point, sweetheart, who warned him?"

Harry stared at the cat, who stared back. Instead of the usual green or gold eyes of a domestic feline, the cat's eyes were deep amber. They were narrowed with suspicion.

"He isn't an Animagus, Harry." Hermione stroked the cat's back, but it felt as tightly strung as a piano wire. "That was the first thing Ron checked."

"Okay." Harry's wand stilled in his hand, and he swung the tip idly in the cat's direction. The cat did not blink. "That's good, then. He still might be someone's familiar. Draco's, do you think?"

"A bit obvious. Perhaps his wife or sister-in-law? I'll get an elf onto it first thing tomorrow. Columbo has been nagging me for another project."

"Good idea."

The cat stretched and flexed his back, then jumped down onto the hearthrug, where he sat down, curling his tail around his toes like an Egyptian votive statue.

"*Petrificus totalis*," Harry murmured. The cat sat ram-rod straight on the hearth, wide eyes fixed on Harry's face.

"What is it, Harry?"

"You can force an Animagus back into its human form as long as you're as strong, or stronger, than the witch or wizard in Animagus form. It took both Sirius and Remus to force Peter out of being a rat, didn't it? And much as I love Ron, he isn't the most powerful of wizards."

"That's true," Hermione said. "I never managed to force Minerva McGonagall back into human form in class, even though she didn't try to fight me. Do you really think this cat is a wizard?"

"I don't want to take any chances."

Hermione's breath caught, and Harry met her gaze, his own wide and wondering.

"Draco runs a potions business," Hermione breathed.

"I don't know who brews the potions, but it isn't Draco he's too busy building the Malfoy business empire."

"Or his wife or sister-in-law; they weren't that good at potions. There has to be someone brilliant behind the company; a researcher who doesn't put their own name on any of the patents. I still read the *New Sorcerer* and *Potions Monthly*, so I'd know..."

"Merlin's hairy saggy scrotum! We're onto something here!"

"Harry James Potter! That's disgusting!"

As Harry turned to her, the cat gave a little shrug. Then, as if peeling off an invisible strait-jacket, he wriggled from the shoulders down and bolted. Harry sent a Stunning Spell but missed, gouging a chunk out of the opposite wall.

"Catch the cat!" Harry yelled, and two house-elves appeared in the passageway. Kojak made a grab but, partially blinded by his dark glasses, allowed the cat to slip between his hands.

"Don't hurt him!" Hermione shouted.

Brother Cadfael, clad in a brown habit and with a fringe of hair around his otherwise bare head, stood between the cat and freedom. The cat clawed his bare leg, screeching like a banshee, and was gone. The elf huffed and pointed a finger at his knee, healing the scratches.

"Does you want us to catch the kitty?" Kojak enquired. "We can throw the kitty in the slammer."

"If that's Snape, he'll have Apparated," Harry said. "Well, what now?"

"I shall go and have a word with Mister Malfoy," Hermione declared. "I've had enough of this; I'm starting to get cross."

Draco Malfoy sat back on his heels before the Floo and refrained from rolling his eyes. "I did tell you that I was intending to move the office to Paris, Father."

"Unfortunately attracting the attention of a certain very nosy young witch. I've just had an owl from..." Lucius glanced down at the scroll in his hand, "Ms Hermione Granger of The Number Twelve House-Elf Detective Agency, requesting an interview at my earliest convenience."

"That's nice for you," Draco remarked, earning a glare from the head in his fireplace.

"The wretched girl was in your year. You know her better than I do. What does she want?"

"I've no idea."

"That's not helpful, Draco."

Draco shrugged.

"You won't be able to buy her off; I can tell you that much. You might as well persuade Severus to meet her; that'll distract her."

"Hm." Lucius stroked his chin. "Not a bad idea. Was she afraid of him?"

Draco snorted.

"I don't think she knows the meaning of the word. If she scents a secret, she won't let go till she's uncovered it; she's tenacious. Or, you could always let her explore the library; that'll keep her occupied for a couple of years."

Lucius appeared horrified.

"Thank you for your support, Draco; I'll keep you informed." His head withdrew from the fireplace, and the green flames vanished.

"Who was it, Draco?" Astoria called from where she was putting Scorpius to bed for his nap.

"Just Father, *again*. I wish he'd find himself another hobby; he's really starting to get on my wick."

Astoria came down the staircase, her light-weight summer robes fluttering around her slender ankles. She slid her arms around his neck.

"He definitely needs to get laid."

Draco smirked and grasped her hips.

"Now that gives me an idea..."

Somewhere in a darkened room, a very large, dark man swathed in robes and glimmers kissed the hand of an elegant witch who smiled and indicated the seat next to her.

"We're waiting for my sister," she murmured. The room was so thoroughly warded that her voice sounded thin, every echo suppressed. A slender wizard sat opposite them, beside a witch who was gazing into a crystal ball, her shadowed face smooth and calm. She curved a hand around the crystal, cupping it lightly.

"They're moving into place," she remarked, "but I can see an aura of danger around them." She looked up, cocking her head to one side. "This is a very imprecise tool; however, it can function similarly to a Foe-Glass. I believe that someone else is scheming."

A third witch came into the room as she spoke, slipping into the vacant chair and arranging her robes. She looked around and nodded.

"Scheming's always been the lifeblood of Slytherins," the big wizard remarked. His voice was dark and deep, resonating despite the wards. "So, Slytherins, shall we begin?"

In the darkness beneath the table, a black cat quietly licked its paw.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 6

Some elves get hooked on watching reruns of the great detectives, an investigation into the dodgy breeding of pedigree Crups leads Hermione and Severus into Lucius Malfoy's bed via the bath, Severus goes back to Hogwarts to retrieve his wand, Delilah Derwent, bastion of pure-blood aristocracy, arrives with her Knickers under one arm to play hanky-panky with Malfoy's Magic Wand, a Crup goes bad and some left-over Death Eaters get their comeuppance. Oh, and of course, Severus gets his just deserts.

Hermione glowered at the gates as they opened silently. They should have given an ominous creak, at the very least. The gravelled drive should have been shrouded in dark cypress, not beech hedges with spring flowers peeping out at their feet, and the house most certainly ought to be a gothic monstrosity. She really, really hated that Malfoy Manor was beautiful. Built of pale Cotswold limestone, it was a jewel of Tudor architecture around an even earlier central building.

She stamped up the steps, and her temper was not improved by being unable to hammer on the oak door because it opened as she raised her hand. An elf clad in a spotless pillowcase stood in the doorway.

"You isn't going to give Waspish clothes, is you?"

Hermione's anger deflated. "No, I promise not to give anyone clothes, unless they actually ask for them."

Waspish nodded.

"Master is feeding the puppies. Would Miss wish to wait inside, or would Miss like to see the Crups?"

"I'll see the Crups, please."

She was vaguely interested in seeing Lucius in his usual environment and considerably less interested in revisiting the scene of her torture at the end of Bellatrix Lestranger's wand.

The elf closed the door behind them and led the way around the right-hand wing of the house, through an archway and into the stable yard.

There was a view of a paddock in which two shining dapple grey horses grazed, their steel-grey wings folded upon their backs. An elf trotted across the yard, levitating a heap of straw through a stable door, and a huge brown tabby Kneazle dozed in the sun on top of a bale of hay.

Lucius Malfoy was wearing riding breeches, gleaming black leather boots and a green checked jacket over a white shirt. His hair was tied back with a black ribbon. Hermione had never seen him clad in anything but robes before. Too intent upon the four little Crups gambolling around his boots to notice her, he sank down on his heels.

"Armagnac," he remarked and pointed at a sandy-coloured Crup. It bounced on the spot, its forked tail a blur of motion, then sat. "Calvados. Schnapps. Palinka." As he spoke, each puppy sat down until all four faced him, their tiny faces expectant. He pointed his wand, and four bowls appeared on the ground, each containing small chunks of meat and vegetables in gravy. "Good Crups," he told them. "You may eat." The Crups did so with a great deal of enthusiasm. He rose smoothly to his feet, turned and met Hermione's gaze.

"Good morning, Miss Granger. How may I help you?" His tone was cool and polite.

"I'd like a word with you, Mr Malfoy."

He extended a hand, palm up. "Be my guest. May I offer you any refreshments? I was about to have tea."

Never would Hermione have expected to find herself leaning on a fence next to Lucius Malfoy, drinking Darjeeling out of a bone china mug.

"Are they Granians?" Hermione asked as the smaller of the two winged horses wandered over to investigate her pockets.

"Of course. They're retired champion racers; the mare is in foal, and the stallion stands at stud and is my favourite hack. I enjoy his speed and his spirit."

"Do you race, Mr Malfoy?"

He shook his head. "That's Draco's sport. I ride them for exercise."

Which accounted, she supposed, for his muscular thighs and taut posterior. She had a moment of horrified realisation that she had actually been ogling Lucius Malfoy's arse, and she turned to pat the horse's neck to hide her overheating face.

"They're beautiful."

The Crup pups were now investigating each other's dinner bowls to ensure that not a scrap had been missed, and she caught the moment when all four of them noticed

her. They looked at each other, back to her, and then barrelled towards her, screeched to a stop and stood in front of her in a row, tongues hanging.

"I have taught them not to jump up," Malfoy said laconically. "They'll be going to their new homes next week. They probably think that you're here to choose one for yourself."

They were very endearing little creatures. Hermione had always preferred cats, but she could see the attraction. She bent down and held out a hand. "No, I'm not going to buy one of you, I'm sorry."

They immediately circled her, sniffing, wagging and nudging at her fingers. "Who are their parents?"

"They're out of Champion Wiltshire's Bright Aura by the import, Champion OwlTime Tennessee Whiskey. The American line brought in fresh blood and, hopefully, will improve hindquarters and bonding with their owners' magic."

"Did it work?"

"I'll have a better idea when I breed the next couple of generations. Draco and Astoria want another pet Crup, so they'll take Schnapps. We'll watch how he develops, and I'll show him and use him at stud if I still like him when he's an adult."

Hermione frowned, recalling her original research into Crups. The *Encyclopaedia Magica* had a large article on the breeding and showing of the animals. "I thought that the British Crup fanciers didn't like American Crups?"

He shrugged. "They don't. They think that they're too big and rather exaggerated and probably have smooth fox terrier blood. Personally, I find them very biddable, highly attuned to their owners...and, if used with care, the smaller ones introduce substance and elegance to our breeding."

"Is that why you used Jack Russell terriers?"

He turned his head, and although his mouth barely moved, his eyes smiled at her: cool, clear and predatory. "What an accusation to make!"

"I notice that you don't deny it."

He looked down at the Crups. Two had got bored and were wrestling, making small growling noises as they tumbled. One was investigating the fence posts, and the last, Schnapps, was sitting on Malfoy's left foot.

"What would you do if I did?"

Hermione realised that she didn't have an answer to that question. Feeling unaccountably flustered, she went into attack mode. "Why did you send Severus Snape to spy on me?"

"My dear Miss Granger," he purred, "the entire Wizarding world believes Severus to be dead. Perhaps someone is playing a prank upon you? What makes you think he survived?"

"His body vanished after the battle of Hogwarts."

"Maybe an enemy destroyed it, or a friend banished it, before it could be interfered with?"

"His portrait in the headmaster's office has never woken."

"I doubt if Severus ever wanted to be there."

"Draco owns a very successful business called Marquess Potions, with a lot of brilliant patents, which has suddenly moved its head office from Diagon Alley to the *Château de Sorcellerie*."

"Really? He did mention the possibility last time he came for dinner. I don't see the connection."

"Of course you do!" Hermione snapped. "He moved because your spy told him that I'd be looking into the activities of all three of you!"

"All three of us? What has Astoria possibly been up to? She's far too busy rearing Scorpius and running the Nocturne Alley restoration project to be involved in anything nefarious."

Hermione refrained from stamping her foot, mainly because Palinka was now leaning against it. "Your wife, Mr Malfoy! Narcissa, the tall blonde woman?"

"Oh, my ex-wife. She lives in France. Draco moved the potions business over to Paris so that he could spend more time with his mother."

Hermione stared. "I didn't know you were divorced."

"Because the divorce went through in France." He summoned a couple of carrots from the stables and held them out to the horses, watching as their velvety muzzles lipped his hands.

"But it was never mentioned in *The Prophet*!"

He shrugged. "We divorced the day that your dear friend married his red-headed sweetheart, so the reporters had their minds on other things. I was surprised that you didn't join the Weasley clan at the same time, I admit."

"That's none of your business," Hermione muttered. Malfoy merely raised a blond eyebrow, and she felt her face warming again. How had the bastard managed to wrest control of the entire conversation? "Look, I know Severus Snape is alive, I know that he's an unregistered Animagus, and I know you sent him to spy on me!"

"An Animagus, you say? What form does he take?"

"A cat."

"Really? Did you force him back to his human form?"

"No, Ron tried but couldn't do it, and he escaped before Harry could try."

"So, you had a cat, which you claim was Severus, whom you couldn't change back? This sounds a little far-fetched to me."

"Harry's an Auror; I run an investigative agency; and *we know* that cat is Snape."

"Do you have any proof of wrongdoing? If so, what are you accusing me of?"

"Being an evil Slytherin, no doubt."

Those six words, spoken behind her in a soft, silky voice, ran through Hermione like an electric shock. She was simultaneously standing in the spring sunshine and transported back to the dungeon classroom of the past. Snape's voice was unmistakable, inspiring a frisson of apprehension as she turned to face the teacher whom she had respected, but whose respect she had never been able to earn in return.

"Professor Snape," she said, and her voice trembled audibly.

"Miss Granger."

He was still Snape. He wore black robes; he had oily black hair and a hooked nose and sharp, impenetrable black eyes; he could have been a statue in marble and jet. This was how she had known him, controlled and implacable, and yet on further examination she could see the changes wrought in him by ten years of peace. He was still lean but had lost that famished, stretched-thin appearance of a man living on the edge of his nerves. He was less sallow than she remembered, although his hair could still do with a trim.

"How did..." Hermione snapped her mouth shut and smiled at him. "I apologise, it's none of my business how you survived. All I can say is that I'm so glad that you did."

He inclined his head, graciously accepting her words as his due. "Lucius and Draco have kept my existence a secret," he told her, "until your interference forced my hand. I cannot allow you to harass my friend simply because he did me a favour."

"Of course," Hermione said. "Marquess Potions gave me a clue. Did you do all the development work yourself? I was really impressed by the way that the treatment for Spattergroit blended Muggle anti-virals and potions..."

"Please," Malfoy murmured, "my dear witch, is this really the time or the place?" He clapped his hands. "Portly, put the pups back into their kennel to rest. Severus, Miss Granger, would you care to join me for lunch? Splendid! Waspish, lunch for three in fifteen minutes in the parlour. Severus, do accompany Miss Granger into the house while I free myself from the faint but distinctive aroma of horse."

He gave a slight bow and Apparated out of the yard. Hermione blinked. The Granian stallion whinnied and pranced around in a circle, standing with his neck arched as the mare grazed on, unconcerned.

"Poser," she said, and Snape gave a tiny huff. Startled, she looked at him and saw the corners of his eyes crinkle.

"He does exude an air of arrogant masculinity, does he not? Come, Miss Granger, let us obey our host's command and avail ourselves of his hospitality. Follow me."

Hermione obeyed, with the impression that she was being manipulated, but with no idea why.

They had just sat down at the table in a light, airy parlour overlooking the terrace when a house-elf appeared at Malfoy's elbow. The elf's ears were drooping, and it was wringing its hands. "Master, there is an Auror in the Floo. He is wishing to speak with Miss Granger."

"Oh, that'll be Harry wondering where I am. May I speak to him?"

Malfoy waved a hand magnanimously in her direction, and Hermione followed the elf out of the room.

"Severus, are you *sniggering*?"

"You really have bitten off more than you can chew."

"My dear chap, she has no idea how to play the game, none at all."

"Because she isn't playing. She got the information that she came for."

"Of course she did; I had to use a tasty bait to reel her in."

"Lucius, what will you do when you land her and find that you have caught a great white shark? She's a Gryffindor!"

"Exactly. She couldn't spy to save her life. A detective agency, honestly!"

"She never claimed to be a spy. She gets her elves to collect the information, then she sifts it, analyses it, researches and draws conclusions *That* is her strength, plus the fact that she has Potter and Weasley at her beck and call."

"Two very young and inexperienced Aurors who got into the service on their names alone."

Snape shook his head. "Potter is the most influential wizard in the country, and Weasley has his family connections. Harm Granger and you'll wish you'd never been born." He grimaced. "They used to make me wish I'd never been born when they were mere schoolchildren."

"You'd better hang around and ensure that I behave myself, hadn't you? Here is the estimable Miss Granger returning to us. I hope that everything is all right, my dear?"

Hermione took her place at the table and shook out her napkin.

"Yes, Harry was just checking up on me. He knew that I was coming here today."

"I see." Malfoy's tone was cool. "Surely he didn't expect any harm to befall you?"

"Experience led him to assume nothing, Mr Malfoy."

Malfoy sucked in a breath, and then inclined his head in reluctant acknowledgement.

"But surely he trusts me?" Snape asked smoothly.

"He doesn't know about you; he merely suspects that you survived."

"You haven't told him that I am here?"

"You didn't say that I could."

"Most... scrupulous of you, Miss Granger."

"We treated you abominably, Professor Snape, but I hope that as an adult I can earn your trust and, perhaps, your respect. I'd like to prove that I'm more than just an insufferable know-it-all."

"That still rankles, does it?"

An elf appeared, silently ladled clear soup into bowls, and floated them to the table.

"It did at the time," Hermione admitted, "but I know you had to keep up the pretence of hating us."

"What makes you believe it all pretence?" Snape helped himself to a bread roll from the basket in the middle of the table and cocked an eyebrow in her direction.

"You hated teaching, and you didn't seem to like children..."

"I hated Potter because he broke all the rules and got away with it, because he was idolised without earning any of the worship, and because he respected no-one."

Hermione took a sip of her soup and then said lightly, "That still rankles, does it?"

Snape glared at her. Lucius Malfoy chortled. "Severus, admit it, you can hold a grudge for England. At least the boy did what he was intended to do."

"Yes," Hermione agreed, "he was always intended to die."

There was silence for a moment, then Snape brushed a breadcrumb from his cuff and gave a tight little smirk. "You have it, Miss Granger."

"What, Professor Snape?"

"If not yet my respect, then certainly my appreciation. You have learned to wield your Gryffindor forthrightness like a rapier."

Hermione grinned. "I don't remember ever getting a compliment from you before. Thank you, I think."

"Slytherins do know how to charm," Malfoy said, earning a scowl from his friend.

"You have raised the talent to an art form, certainly."

"Now Miss Granger will look for the hidden meanings, and wicked intentions, behind everything we say. If, for example," Lucius turned to Hermione, "I was to remark that the colour of your robe brings out the golden highlights in your hair, you'll wonder at my motives. If Severus tells you that your ability to research is admirable, he stands the risk of getting his face slapped."

"I wouldn't slap Professor Snape!" Hermione protested.

"Suggesting that you would, in fact, slap me?"

"I wouldn't dare!"

"Oh, really?" Malfoy's eyes glinted. "Why not? Am I such an ogre that you tremble before me in fear?"

"Witches tend to tremble before Lucius in a very different state than abject fear," Snape said dryly.

Hermione grinned again. "Do you always do this?"

"Do what? Would you care for a glass of this rather good Sauvignon Blanc from the Loire Valley? Draco recommended it."

"Yes, thank you. You seem to be deliberately undermining each other's attempts to flirt."

Malfoy gave an exaggerated flinch and clapped his hand to his chest. "Attempts?" he gasped, just as Snape exclaimed, "Flirt?" in a slightly horrified voice.

"Oh, Merlin, Gryffindors," Malfoy said, waving a hand at the elf, who immediately banished the empty soup bowls and replaced them with dinner plates. Dishes appeared, laden with salads, smoked salmon, cheeses and baked ham. "Truce, Miss Granger, I beg you. No more barbed truths until we have finished lunch, at least."

"If you stop trying to twist everything I say."

"We wouldn't be Slytherins if we didn't, my dear. Do try the Blue Vinney, if you enjoy strong cheese."

For a while, there was no sound but the gentle clink of cutlery and the screams from a couple of peacocks competing for the attentions of a hen. Hermione could see one of the cocks on the low wall around the terrace fanning his spectacular tail and quivering with frustration. The peahen pecked at the lawn with supreme indifference.

"Miss Granger," Snape said, leaning back in his chair and sipping at his wine, "indulge my curiosity. Why did you not join your two friends in the Ministry?"

"I didn't see the appeal in running around in uniform Stunning people."

"But surely the Department of Mysteries must have tempted you?" Malfoy enquired.

Hermione shrugged. "They didn't want me." Both wizards stared at her in surprise, and she smiled. "They think I'm a loose cannon. They're right. I talked to a couple of Unspeakables and decided it wasn't for me; I'd have had to do as the Ministry told me, even if I disagreed on a matter of principle. Much as I admire Kingsley, we've all had enough experience of corruption not to trust the Ministry or the Wizengamot. Harry and Ron wanted to make changes from within; I didn't have as much faith. It only needs Kingsley to be voted out and replaced with another like Fudge, and we'd have our hands tied. I preferred to remain on the outside."

"And the detective agency?"

"I took in elves that had nowhere to go, and they needed work."

"It never occurred to you to find new owners for them?"

Although Hermione's eyes flashed, she answered quite calmly. "Sell them, you mean? Like inanimate objects?"

Although she was fired with indignation, she caught the narrowing of Snape's black eyes as he signalled a message to his friend.

Malfoy's lips curved in a self-satisfied smile. "After the war, I took in three elves from Death Eaters killed in battle. Portly now tends my Crups, while Rackly and Bevy live in France at Narcissa's chateau and are learning the secrets of viticulture. All three appear satisfied with their lot. What would you have had me do with them?"

"Oh," Hermione said, somewhat contrite. "It's just from the way you treated Dobby..."

Although Malfoy's handsome face remained smooth and impassive, his eyes might have been made from arctic ice.

"If I recall, one of the Weasleys sided with the Minister against his own family and was only forgiven when he returned to the fold. Why should an elf be any different? That elf was never loyal to his fellows or his masters. My elves are afraid of you because they fear that you will give them clothes, and they will lose their home, their families, children and partners. Many of them can trace their ancestry back to the elves who accompanied my forebears to Britain with William the Bastard. Their love for this manor is no less than my own. Dobby's open rebellion was a cause of great distress to the other elves and of great annoyance to me. Potter may regard him as a hero, but I do not. Would you revere someone who betrayed you? Pettigrew, for example?"

"No," Hermione said quietly, "I apologise."

Malfoy inclined his head.

"Although Dobby told Harry that you threatened him with death, and forced him to iron his hands and shut them in the oven."

"She never gives up," Snape remarked.

"An estimable trait in a private investigator," Malfoy agreed amiably. "Miss Granger, I wish to employ you...and your elves." He leaned back in his chair and smirked at her.

Hermione mentally counted to ten, so that when she responded she sounded confident rather than insulted. "I'm not for sale, Mr Malfoy."

"If you were, I'd go elsewhere. I can give you a list of influential breeders of Crups in Britain, and I'd like you to find out how many of them have crossed their lines with Muggle terriers. I suspect that the practice is extensive. At this stage, I don't want them to know that they're being investigated. I'll put a resolution before the committee of the Crup Association, of which I'm currently treasurer, that the rules be changed to allow judicious crossing with suitable Muggle breeds. If they refuse to put the resolution to vote, as I'm sure they will, I will present your evidence to show that I'm not the only person carrying out crossbreeding, merely the first with the courage to admit to it."

"What if I find that you are the only one?"

He shrugged. "No doubt I'll weather the ensuing scandal." He flicked his wand and the wine bottle floated around the table, refilling their glasses. "I've survived worse."

Hermione happened to be watching the wine on its circuit, and she caught a flicker of concern on Snape's face. Hermione had little sympathy for the Malfoys. She considered that they had brought their misfortunes upon themselves, but Snape had never appeared to have many friends and she was prepared to give Malfoy the benefit of the doubt for his sake.

"Very well," Hermione said. "I'll send an elf to collect the list of breeders, and to deliver our terms and conditions."

"Excellent! Let us drink to success in our endeavours." He raised his glass. "To us."

Warily, Hermione sipped her wine, wondering what she had committed herself to.

The Crup wagged its tail as it stared up at the wizard who knelt on the hearthrug. He slowly reached out and touched the creature's head.

"Oh yes, little brother. Yes, this will do nicely. We're going to make them pay." He stared into space, obviously not seeing the peeling wallpaper or filthy furniture of the Muggle hovel. "We're going to make them all sorry that they ever forgot about us. Aren't we?"

The Crup growled and nudged his hand.

"I'm going to call you 'Vengeance.'"

On the rickety table, a woman stared out of a dingy painting and bared her teeth.

Winky, alias Miss Marple, pattered into the office, came to a stop in front of Hermione's desk and cleared her throat. Hermione looked up from her paperwork and blinked. The elf was wearing a knitted lilac cardigan, a matching skirt and a string of what appeared to be genuine pearls.

"There's a new customer to see Miss," she squeaked.

"Thanks Wink sorry, Miss Marple. Do you know who it is?"

"The wizard gentleman says he's Master Grey."

Hermione was used to the elvish mindset by now. "But you don't think he's really Mr Grey at all?"

"I is not seeing through his glamours," Miss Marple admitted.

"Thank you. Please ask him to come up."

She loosened her wand in her sleeve and activated the tea-kettle as swift footsteps approached along the landing.

Miss Marple opened the door to admit a slim, plain-featured man with brown hair and dark grey robes.

Hermione got to her feet. "Good morning. Welcome to The Number Twelve House-Elf Detective Agency. Do have a seat. How may I help you?"

He waited until the elf had shut the door before sitting down. He chose the chair with the view of both door and window: the one that her Auror friends always took.

Hermione nodded, gave the teapot a flick of her wand, and stated, "Black with one sugar, am I correct, Professor?"

"Show-off," he remarked.

"Process of elimination."

He cocked his head and allowed his glamour to fall. His nose curved into a hook; his robes, his brown eyes and his hair all darkened to black; and he smirked at her. "Really? Do tell."

"Apart from you, the only people who are powerful enough to hold a glamour against an elf are all friends of mine, and if they didn't want to be seen coming here they'd Floo or Apparate through my wards rather than go to the trouble of using a glamour."

"I could have been Malfoy."

Hermione tilted her head at the mirror on the wall. "Disguised Foe-Glass."

"And it still works?"

"Of course it does," Hermione said smugly. She handed him a cup of tea and stirred milk into her own. "Minerva McGonagall transfigured it for me, as a Christmas present."

He crossed one leg over the other, his robes falling into folds around his ankles. They sipped tea in silence, Hermione content to simply watch him.

She felt as if she had a mythical beast come to roost in her office. Such a thing could happen, but usually only when Hagrid visited. Snape's angles had softened...not because he had gained more than a few pounds in weight, but because the tension had eased in his back and shoulders. He had probably been very tired for a very long time, but after ten years of freedom and recovery he appeared alert and competent and mildly amused, if the subtle glitter in his black eyes was anything to go by.

"I wish to employ you, Miss Granger," he said after a while.

"Please don't tell me you want me to investigate Lucius Malfoy?"

He scowled. "Why the hell should I want to do that?"

Hermione refused to be intimidated. "To make my brain explode from the logistics of it."

"So who else is interested in Lucius?"

"Client confidentiality," Hermione said, selecting a custard cream. "Biscuit?"

He shook his head irritably. "You don't take this seriously, do you?"

"I take it very seriously, Professor. This is my living, and I do it well."

"Not well enough to keep your elves out of sight when they're working."

Hermione frowned and then shrugged.

"Oh, Lucius is still that paranoid, is he? Well, I didn't tell them to go under cover, just asked them to look into his Crup breeding kennel. That's all public record, anyway. If he has something to hide..."

"He isn't paranoid; he knows that Slytherins are always under suspicion and can never redeem themselves, however hard they might try."

Long-held resentment still edged his smooth voice with anger.

"That isn't true, Professor."

"Really?" Here was the arrogant tone of old. "How many Slytherins do you work with, Miss Holier-than-thou?"

"I've had professional dealings with the Zabinis, and with Astoria Malfoy, Pansy and Viola Parkinson and Wulric Mulciber in the last month, so don't get on your high horse with me!"

His lips curled in a sneer. "But you wouldn't meet with them socially, would you?"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake! I had lunch with you and Lucius, didn't I? Now, did you come here to insult me, or did you actually want me to investigate something?"

He put his cup and saucer down on the desk with rather more force than necessary. "If you can control your Gryffindor temper enough to pay attention, Miss Granger, I wish you to discover the whereabouts of a rather special wand."

Hermione controlled a shudder, and he raised an eyebrow at her.

"Déjà vu," she muttered. "Go on, whose wand are we talking about?"

"Mine," he said, settling back into his seat. "It was left behind in the Shack when the Malfoy elf rushed me to a Healer to save my life. Once I had recovered sufficiently to enquire about it, it was no longer to be found."

"Surely you have a wand that works for you?"

He drew a pale wand from his robe and held it up between thumb and forefinger.

"My current wand was obtained from Zweig of Heidelberg, maple with a core of thestral tail hair."

"A real potion-maker's wand," Hermione commented. "Maple for balance, promise and practicality. Was your original wand from Ollivander?"

"It had a heart of occamy feather, with a shaft of dark cherry wood and an ash handle," he said. "It was a unique wand; Ollivander was reluctant to let me have it, but it was immediately clear that the wand had chosen me."

"Doesn't ash symbolise sacrifice? And cherry wood is for death."

"Cherry stands for rebirth and new awakenings, and ash is for sensitivity and higher awareness," Snape said, "which is why I would like my old wand back. My maple wand is, as you say, a fine potion-maker's wand, but it is far too inflexible for defence and too... sweet-natured for effective hexing."

He swished the wand through the air, creating an arc of golden sparks, before stowing it away in his robe.

Hermione eyed him thoughtfully. "So you need your old wand because you're considering coming back, then?"

"Indeed."

She was dying to ask why, but the curl of his lip and combative glitter in his eyes suggested that he had no intention of offering further information.

"I'll do my best for you."

"Do not announce my presence to your Gryffindor associates until I am fully armed, if you would be so kind. Client confidentiality, Miss Granger." He stood, turned and waved a hand, causing the door to creak open. He left the office in a swirl of robes that made her smile.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 6

Some elves get hooked on watching reruns of the great detectives, an investigation into the dodgy breeding of pedigree Crups leads Hermione and Severus into Lucius Malfoy's bed via the bath, Severus goes back to Hogwarts to retrieve his wand, Delilah Derwent, bastion of pure-blood aristocracy, arrives with her Knickers under one arm to play hanky-panky with Malfoy's Magic Wand, a Crup goes bad and some left-over Death Eaters get their comeuppance. Oh, and of

course, Severus gets his just deserts.

"Miss Marple," Hermione said, walking along the row of elves who stood to attention in the huge, gloomy cavern of the kitchen. "Is it your turn to cook today?"

"Yes, Miss Hermione."

"Okay. Kippy..."

"I is Doctor Watson!"

"Sorry, Watson. Please continue your search for Madam Fripperie. Have you tried her cousin's place in Truro yet?"

"I is going today."

"Fine." Hermione ticked a box on the form attached to her clipboard. "Sherlock, you have a list of Crup breeders. I want you to get hold of copies of pedigrees of the litters bred in the last ten years and find out what colours the parents of the litters were, as well as the colours of their offspring. You don't have to mark down every detail, just say if they were black, brown, red and white, tan and white, or whatever." She ticked another box.

"Is I watching Mr Ramsbottom?" enquired the elf in the fedora.

"Yes, we need to find out if he's still in contact with Miss Pritchett."

"I is on it!" the elf squeaked happily. "I is intercepting the owls!"

"No," Hermione sighed, "that's against the law."

"Philip Marlowe ain't scared of no cops!"

"Well, I'm not going to get into another argument with Harry and Ron about illegal owl-post tapping. We want proof of a relationship that can be used in the divorce court, so it has to be obtained legally. Just make a record of where he goes and don't be seen. Brother Cadfael, you're still looking for evidence to connect Edwin Mulciber with his aunt's stolen jewellery, so speak to the elves employed by the Knockturn Alley pawnshops and find out if they saw him trying to pass on the diamonds. Kojak, you'll finish the filing, take messages and hold the fort while I'm out."

"Can I do some cleaning?" the elf asked hopefully. "If I is very good and does lots of fort holding?"

Hermione suppressed her smile. "Very well, as long as you save the kitchen for Sherlock..."

"I is cleaning the kitchen!" Miss Marple exclaimed, her voice so high-pitched with indignation that she sounded more like a bat than an elf. "I is cooking so I is cleaning! Sherlock is a bad elf; Sherlock didn't polish the bottoms of the pans! I finds grains of sugar behind the dresser last time Sherlock sweeps! Sherlock," she drew herself up to her full height, "is a careless elf!"

"I is not!"

"You is! You is too busy doing naughty stuff with Watson..."

"Too much information! Goodness, I'm sure you can sort it all out between you! How on earth do the Hogwarts elves get everything done without squabbling?"

"They is bad elves; they has duels in the under-scullyery," Miss Marple said and folded her little arms across her knitted cardigan.

"You is a snitching elf!"

"I is a good elf. Even if I is a free elf, I still cleans properly!"

"All right, just don't have any duels here, please. Miss Marple, you're in charge of the kitchen today; Kojak, look after the office and the business. The rest of you have your jobs. Off you go."

With a series of sharp pops, the elves vanished, apart from Kojak and Miss Marple. They glared at one another for a minute, then scuttled off to their designated domains.

The black cat stretched and strolled out of the shadows under the staircase.

"Hello, Professor," Hermione said. The cat blinked disdainfully. "I haven't forgotten; I'm going to look for your wand myself." The cat turned its back, sat down and began washing its paw. She sighed and picked up her outdoor cloak. "I'm going now, sir. I'll report back soon, I promise."

The cat did not look around until she had left; then it strolled across the kitchen and up the stairs towards her office.

Hermione breathed in a lungful of fresh, chilly Scottish air, with its subtle tang of heather and sea, mountains and pine. She had spent far too long in London. She strode up the path from Hogsmeade, remembering when she and her friends could make the journey at a run and still have breath to laugh with each other, shout insults at Slytherins and banter with Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. She sometimes wondered whether things had changed at all: if she could ever make a difference to anything or if the inertia of tradition and habit were too much to work against.

She could see flashes of colour above the Quidditch pitch, and something large flapped up from the Forest, circled and descended with a fierce cry. To be here again as a student, alive with youthful possibilities, unable to see Thestrals... She snorted. She was all of twenty-eight years old! Barely a fifth of the way through the lifespan of a witch.

"Ermione!" Hagrid roared, his tremendous voice carrying across the lawns. He waved with one hand, clutching the rein of a Hippogriff with the other. His entire class turned to gawp at her. The Hippogriff screeched, insulted that he was ignoring it, and he yelled, "See yer later, okay?" as he turned back to placate the beast. Hermione made a gesture that she hoped conveyed a greeting, then remembered that she was a witch and drew her wand. She sent her otter Patronus with instructions to bow to the Hippogriff and tell Hagrid that she would call on him later.

As she reached the great doorway into the castle, a silvery figure floated towards her and gracefully doffed its hat.

"Hermione," Sir Nicholas de Mimsy Porpington exclaimed, straightening up and hastily shoving his head back onto his neck, "how delightful to see you! Shall I accompany you to the headmistress' office?"

"Hello, Sir Nicholas, lovely to see you, too. I've actually come to see Neville Longbottom," she said. "Do you know if he's teaching?"

Sir Nicholas waved at a large painting of a groom leading a flying horse. The groom approached the front of the canvas and cupped his hand around his ear.

"Sidney, the lady wishes to converse with Professor Longbottom."

"Oh, ar," Sidney said, "roight. Oi better goo up to thickey staaaaff rroom then, see if 'ee be yer."

"I assume that was English," Sir Nicholas remarked as the groom flung himself astride the horse and urged it to spread its wings and flap up through the canvases lining the main stairwell. Hermione and Sir Nicholas had barely crossed the entrance hall when the horse plunged back down through the paintings.

"Ee be on 'is way up naow, Sir Nick."

"Thank you," Sir Nicholas sighed, and Sidney saluted and allowed his charge to canter right through the middle of a group of picnicking witches, who shook their fists at him. "After you, dear lady."

Hermione found Professors Sinistra and Vector already helping themselves to tea and biscuits and was introduced to the new Charms professor, Filius Flitwick having recently retired. Soon the teachers began arriving en masse, and she submitted to being greeted effusively by those who had taught her and stared at curiously by the rest. Eventually she was able to grab Neville's arm.

"I want to ask you something, if you've got a minute?"

"Sure. It must be urgent if it can't wait till the weekend?"

"Not urgent, more confidential. It's for a case I'm working on. You know how nosy Ron and George are."

"Okay, then. Let's go down to the greenhouse."

As they walked through the corridors, she watched how the students of all houses greeted him: with the affectionate respect that she and her contemporaries had afforded Flitwick and Sprout. Even the Slytherins were courteous.

They entered the warm and humid air of Neville's private little greenhouse. He muttered something, drew his wand and adjusted the skylights, and then perched on a bench.

"How can I help, Hermione?"

"After the battle of Hogwarts, you helped to gather up the bodies, didn't you?"

Although Neville gave a slight twitch, not quite a wince, he gazed at her out of clear blue eyes. "Yes."

"Who went to fetch Snape?"

He rolled his wand between his fingers without looking at it. "I did. I thought we ought to treat him with respect. You and Harry were emphatic about that."

"When you found his body had gone, was there anything left?"

"Apart from a great pool of blood and a few flies?" He hitched himself more comfortably on the bench. "I'm really curious now!"

"Please, Neville?"

"Something tells me you already know. Yes, his wand was in the middle of the blood. He had to be dead. He'd never have left his wand, not Snape."

"What happened to it?"

"I gave it to Professor McGonagall. I reckoned it ought to stay at Hogwarts; he'd lived here almost all his life. It isn't as if we could bury it with him."

"That's what I thought. Thanks ever so much."

"I'm dying of curiosity here, Hermione!"

"Can't explain yet, but I think you'll find out soon enough."

"Are you planning a memorial for him? About time; poor old sod deserved it."

"Even though he scared the pants off us all?"

Neville laughed and flicked his wand to open the door. "Tell you what: he can't have been all bad. The rest of us liked and trusted our Heads of house, but his Slytherins adored him. Here come my fifth-years; we're dividing and potting up venom-spitting cobra lilies today, so I'd better make sure they've got their Herbology heads on."

"I'll leave you to it. See you down the pub on Saturday!"

Neville raised his hand in farewell and hurried towards his approaching class. Hermione returned to the castle and made her way to the headmistress' tower.

Minerva McGonagall peered at Hermione over the top of her square spectacles and folded her hands on her blotter.

"Snape's wand? May I ask why you're suddenly interested, Hermione? He died ten years ago."

"I'm working with Slytherins," Hermione said, which was true, after all, "and someone asked me what had happened to the professor's wand."

The headmistress sighed.

"Poor Severus. Not a day goes past... Well, no reason to be morbid on a fine day like today. The wand's behind you."

Hermione turned around. The sword of Gryffindor hung on the wall in a protective glass case flanked by the Sorting Hat dozing on its shelf, a painting of a phoenix, and a thin, dark splint of wood held against the stone wall by two metal clamps. She walked across the office and peered at the wand. She could see where the two different woods were joined, the ash handle darkened by use to almost the same shade as the cherry shaft. As she reached to touch it, she heard the headmistress draw in a sharp breath.

"Please don't move it," she said. The anxiety in Minerva's voice alerted Hermione's investigative instincts.

"Is it dangerous?"

Minerva's lips thinned into narrow lines. Hermione remembered the Elder Wand and all the chaos and misery that had resulted from Voldemort's desire for its ultimate power.

"The wand isn't...oh, Merlin, I suppose I might as well explain. Please don't let this go any further than these walls. Do you recall the problems we had after the school was renovated?"

Hermione shook her head. "I was at college. I remember Harry said something about the wards not being right and he helped to raise them."

"Indeed they were not right, and still are not balanced correctly. The wards were originally created by the four founders, and any major changes are made by representatives of all four houses. Voldemort destroyed the wards, and after the war we needed to rebuild them. Pomona, Filius and I very swiftly realised that Horace Slughorn, for all his willingness to assist, was not suitable. Hogwarts would not accept his help. When we tried to force the castle to raise its wards, the backlash knocked poor Horace off his feet, and only Filius' quick wand-work saved the old fellow from being crushed by falling stones. Aurora Sinistra tried with a similar result except that, this time, we didn't push so hard and she was uninjured. Harry suggested that, as the Sorting Hat almost put him into Slytherin, he should try. Hogwarts seemed to grudgingly accept his presence, but only when Filius suggested that Harry use Severus' wand did the wards reform. That wand remains in contact with the stonework, pinning the Slytherin quarter of the wards to the structure. As soon as it is removed, the wards start to unravel. The past headmasters and headmistresses tell me that they have seen similar things happen before, when one of the houses no longer has the strength to sustain its share of the wards."

"Is Professor Sinistra still head of Slytherin?"

"Yes, and a perfectly effective one, too. I really don't know what the castle is playing at, sometimes."

"I warned you, Minerva," the thin, sneering voice of Phineas Nigellus Black remarked from the darkness of his portrait, "if the house of Slytherin is allowed to wither away, the entire school will suffer."

"Slytherin is perfectly all right," the headmistress snapped.

"Slytherin is derided and scorned as much as ever!"

"Now, now," Dumbledore murmured, "being all bitter and twisted isn't going to make you any more popular, young Phineas, and the same goes for the Slytherin students."

"Exactly! You see what I mean?" Phineas appealed to the portraits around him. "If we're quiet, we're being bitter and twisted; if we talk to each other, we're plotting, since Merlin knows, no-one else will talk to us! Deride us and scorn us, and see what happens! Oh, excuse me, you've already tried that tactic, haven't you? Why don't you"

"Enough!" Professor McGonagall snapped, and Phineas turned around and stalked out of his portrait, the very embodiment of offended pride. "I'm sorry about that," she sighed.

"Don't worry; I know what he's like."

"Yes, you do, don't you? Wretched fellow, he has a chip on his shoulder big enough to make a broom handle with. Enough of my ruminations, Hermione; tell me how your detective business is going. Would you like tea?"

They moved to the fireplace and busied themselves with tea and scones and strawberry jam, and it was all Hermione could do to rein in her impatient desire to speak to Snape.

The black cat had gone when she returned home, so Hermione sent an owl to Snape telling him that his wand was at Hogwarts, but that she had been unable to obtain it for him. Not surprisingly, he arrived that evening looking decidedly displeased.

"Surely Minerva isn't so emotionally attached to it that she refused to sell it to you?"

"I didn't even ask, to be honest."

He glared. Ten years away from the dungeon classroom had not diminished his ability to convey his displeasure nonverbally. Hermione felt perversely gratified, particularly as it was hardly her fault.

"Your wand is holding the wards up."

His glare morphed from irate to interrogative, so she explained the situation as the headmistress saw it. He was Snape, and therefore she was not allowed to get away with that.

"And what is your understanding of the situation, Miss Granger?"

"Hogwarts is aware of your survival."

"You equate a castle with a grieving pet."

"It's sentient, isn't it? It locked Dolores Umbridge out of the headmaster's office when she tried to take over."

"Yes," he said quietly, "it's sentient. I did not die, resign or retire, so the castle allows Minerva to run the school and hold the wards, but she is still operating as my deputy even if she is unaware of the fact."

"You need to go back, sir."

His lip curled into the old sneer. "Really? Do I?"

"Even if only to hand in your resignation, so that the wards can be rebuilt from scratch. Hogwarts won't allow them to be stripped completely because you haven't given your permission, and there isn't a strong enough Slytherin presence to rebuild them on the existing base. The castle can't be left undefended until you die naturally, can it?"

He snorted. "And what if I don't want to go back?"

He was as bad as Harry and Ron rebelling against doing their homework.

"Then don't. You asked me to find your wand; I found it. I'm not going to steal it for you and wreck the wards of the school that you were prepared to commit murder to protect."

Snape's shoulders relaxed, a barely visible change in his posture that nevertheless indicated a change in his emotional state.

"Very well, Miss Granger. Kindly make arrangements with Minerva to gather the representatives of the other three houses. I will assist in the rebuilding of the wards."

"Can I warn them that you're back?"

"No," he said, turning to the door in a flurry of black, "I'm damned if I'll run the gauntlet of the press and a crowd of idle onlookers. Owl me when you have fixed a date."

The house-elf sucked on the mouthpiece of his meerschaum pipe. He had cut two holes in his deerstalker hat to accommodate his ears; the overall effect was disconcerting.

"I has found the pedigrees and makes notes of the colours of the Crups," he told Hermione.

"Excellent! Thank you, Sherlock. Now we need to see if any of the colours indicate cross-breeding with Muggle terriers."

"I has seen many, many Crups," the elf said. "They is lots of pretty colours."

"I'm sure they are."

"I has only seen one stripey Crup."

"Stripey? Do you mean brindle?" The elf appeared puzzled, so Hermione Summoned a library book on coat colours and inheritance patterns in dogs and opened it, flicking through the pages.

"Here, that's a brown brindle Great Dane, and there's a black brindle and white Whippet."

Sherlock pointed to the Whippet.

"The stripey Crup was like that but no white." He touched the non-moving Muggle photograph and Hermione watched as the coloured coat pattern flowed across the entire dog. Sherlock frowned and the colours morphed, flashing through shades of black, blue and grey before settling into a pattern of dark grey stripes on a blue-grey background.

"A blue brindle? Well, according to this book, brindle is dominant over non-brindle, and brindle isn't a recognised Crup colour, so that's definite evidence of cross-breeding to a Muggle dog. Where did you see it?"

Sherlock sucked his pipe, making a rather disgusting slurping noise. "Stripey Crup was in Western Piercy."

"Where's that?"

"Mister Malfoy's house is a mile from Western Piercy."

"Had one of Malfoy's Crups escaped?"

Sherlock shook his head. "Not a Malfoy Crup. It ran away when I saw it."

"Was it definitely a Crup, not a Muggle dog?"

"Tail," Sherlock said succinctly.

"Interesting. Thanks, keep an eye open for it and we'll bear it in mind." Hermione made a note to mention the brindle Crup next time she reported to Malfoy.

"You're being very mysterious, Hermione," the headmistress remarked as they ascended the staircase.

"I know, and I'm sorry, but my client insisted. All I can say is that this is your best chance of repairing the wards."

"I do hope you're not expecting me to allow Lucius Malfoy into the school," Professor McGonagall said repressively.

"No, although Lucius has made an effort to reform."

The old witch sniffed audibly. "Be that as it may. Here we are. You and I shall represent Gryffindor, of course; Professor Vector is here on behalf of Ravenclaw; and Professor Jeremiah Causley, our new Transfiguration professor, is a staunch Hufflepuff. I also took the liberty of asking my dear old friends Filius and Pomona to be present. They're both happy to assist."

She opened the door to her office. The teachers, past and present, stood in a group around Dumbledore's portrait. They turned to greet Hermione or, in the case of Pomona Sprout, to give her a hug that smelled vaguely of compost. Not to be outdone, Filius Flitwick levitated himself and Hermione hugged him and kissed his cheek, making the little wizard blush.

"So," Flitwick said, rubbing his hands as he sank back to the floor, "we have two strong representatives of each of three houses. Who have you rustled up for Slytherin, Miss Granger?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "Please be prepared to be shocked," she said. "I mean it. He said I wasn't allowed to tell you, but I don't want anyone to have a heart attack."

"She means us oldies," Sprout said, nudging McGonagall with her elbow.

Flitwick cocked his head. "You've never been prone to exaggeration, Miss Granger, so I doubt that you're starting now." He turned to stare up at a dark painting high on the wall. In it, a figure sat immobile in his painted chair, not slumbering as many of the older headmasters and headmistresses did, but flat and unbreathing. "Minerva, Pomona and Septima, we spent many a long evening after the war lamenting one death in particular. I don't say that the emotion was wasted, because we had a great deal to feel guilty for, but I do believe that Miss Granger is trying to tell us that our grief was misplaced. Am I right?"

Before Hermione could formulate a reply that would not break her promise to her client, McGonagall gave a little gasp. Hermione felt the floor twitch minutely beneath her feet, a subtle movement as if the castle drew in its breath.

"Merlin," the headmistress breathed, "the wards just shifted."

"Are they breached?" Flitwick drew his wand.

"No. They opened and closed again, just as they did when Albus used to Apparate in or out. Someone came through them...no, two people. One was brought in side-along. How strange."

They waited until Hermione heard footsteps running lightly up the stairs followed by someone tapping on the door to the office. She felt the tension in everyone around her, and McGonagall cleared her throat before calling out to the visitor to enter. In walked Draco Malfoy.

A slight smirk twisted his lips, as if he recognised the moment of anticlimax. "Good morning, Headmistress, Professors, Miss Granger." He bowed very correctly, his beautifully cut robes of heavy silk swishing around his feet.

"How did you get through the wards, Mr Malfoy?" Hermione could see McGonagall's wand settled in her sleeve, ready to be drawn in an instant.

"I didn't," Draco said, his grey eyes wide and innocent and no less cold than the headmistress' voice. "I was brought in. My friend asked me to assist with the rebuilding of the Slytherin quarter of the wards and I felt that it was the least I could do. Reparation should be made," he paused for emphasis and added, "but not by him: never by him."

"He owes no-one," Flitwick said quietly. "I no longer have the right to thank you on behalf of the school, Mr Malfoy, but I'd like to thank you personally."

"Actually, no, you should thank my father, Professor Flitwick. I was somewhat ineffectual at the time."

"Ah." Flitwick, who never held grudges, rubbed his chin and shrugged. "Fair enough; I shall owl your father tomorrow."

"Great Merlin," McGonagall breathed, "can it be true?"

"Shall we go down? He's waiting. If I may?" Without waiting for permission, Draco held out his hand and said, *Accio* Snape's ash and cherry wand."

As it flew past her shoulder, McGonagall snatched the wand with reflexes that would not have shamed a Seeker., "Mr Malfoy," she said in a clear, steady voice, "I should like to return that wand myself." She tucked it in her robe and led the way with her head high.

They came to a halt just inside the staff entrance, clustered together apart from Draco, who wandered off to one side. Across the Great Hall, the heart of the castle, the sun cast stripes of honey-gold light on the empty stone-flagged floor. Then Hermione heard footsteps that could never be mistaken for Draco's. The emphatic, staccato tap of Snape's boot heels and the almost inaudible swish of his robes brought a lump to Hermione's throat. She heard Flitwick give a little gasp, and Sprout murmur, "Oh, mercy me, it really is him," in a choked voice.

Snape strode through the open doors, gliding from shadow to light to shade, the sunlight briefly illuminating his impassive face. As a child, Hermione had thought him cold and aloof, but now she recognised his unflinching self-control. He came to a halt facing them, his robes settling about his angular frame.

"Headmistress," he said, both a greeting and an understated challenge.

Hermione clenched her hands until her nails bit into her palms, willing McGonagall to rise to the occasion, to show herself to be a witch worthy of the highest regard, as Hermione had always believed.

"I have something of yours," McGonagall said, producing the wand. She reversed it and held it out handle first, supported across her wrist, presenting it as an opponent returns a wand to a worthy adversary disarmed in a duel. Flitwick nodded his approval and Snape's lips twisted in a wry smile. As he reached for the wand and curled his fingers around its long-familiar shaft, she said clearly, "*Headmaster*."

Snape's gaze, black on black, rose to meet hers. Whatever she looked for in those almost impenetrable eyes, she obviously found it, because she exclaimed, "Oh, Severus! Welcome home, my dear boy, welcome home," and her voice quavered and broke on the final word.

Now it was Snape whom Hermione waited upon. He could easily take a petty revenge for decades of mistrust and rivalry, and although she hoped that he would rise above his baser impulses, this was Snape, after all. Draco shifted slightly behind her. Snape glanced up, not at young Malfoy, but at Hermione, before he replied.

"Thank you, Minerva."

"I'm so sorry..."

"Severus..."

"Forgive me for doubting you..."

The apologies overlapped in a chorus from the teachers, except for Causley, who had not been at Hogwarts during the war.

"No," Snape said, "stop. You all believed what Albus and I intended you to believe; had things been otherwise, I would have failed."

"But you could have trusted us!"

"No, I could not," he said softly, holding up one hand. "Could you have hidden the fact of my duplicity under *Veritaserum* or *Legilimency*? Could you have fought me, truly fought to kill, had you known? I do not think you could, but perhaps more to the point, Dumbledore did not believe you could."

"You're right," Flitwick said sadly, "but I still need to say it. We were friends once, or so I believed."

"For my part, we always were."

"You're a braver man than I am, Headmaster Snape."

Snape inclined his head and reached down to accept the little man's hand. Flitwick clasped it, gulped and turned away, trying not to sniffle. Pomona Sprout wiped her sleeve across her eyes, leaving a slight smudge of earth on her forehead. She swayed a little towards Snape, as if acting under an impulse to embrace him, but the sardonic lift of his eyebrow dissuaded her. Minerva McGonagall reached out and delicately placed a hand on his shoulder, gave it a quick squeeze and released it again.

"I offer my apologies anyway, Severus, and I'm so glad to see you looking well. I hope that you're happy in whatever you're doing now."

"Thank you, Minerva. Shall we attend to these recalcitrant wards?"

Without waiting for a reply, he strode to the centre of the hall, pointed his wand at the floor and wordlessly levitated one of the great flagstones, setting it to one side. Hermione approached, and saw that he had revealed the top of a flight of uneven steps leading down into darkness. Snape lit his wand, again without a word, and led the way down.

They descended into a stone chamber, its groined ceiling supported by thick pillars. The acrid tang of ancient stone hung in the air. Flames rose in the wall sconces, and Hermione felt something prickle across the tiny hairs on her arms and neck: the touch of powerful magic.

"Hogwarts," Snape said in a conversational tone, "I'm back."

Hermione gasped. Rising out of the floor, emerging from the walls and fluttering down from the roof were thin filaments of silver like spider's webs. The gossamer strands gathered around Snape, translucent and fragile, weaving into a web that was still attached to the castle by a multitude of hair-fine threads barely thick enough to see. He raised his wand. "Slytherin," he said, "now Hufflepuff."

Jeremiah Causley stepped forward, rather tentatively, and stood transfixed while the castle wrapped him in its fragile web. His expression changed from wary to rapt. "I can feel the entire castle..." he said, "thousands of tiny magical connections."

"Ravenclaw."

Professor Vector took her place confidently and turned up her face, closing her eyes as she felt the castle embrace her.

"Gryffindor."

Minerva McGonagall did not even move; she held up her hands and gathered the strands of magic out of the air.

"Minerva, Pomona and Filius, you have done this before. For the benefit of everyone else, we will now assist our fellows to draw the strands together until we have four ropes of magic. I will then plait them and send them out in a loop to circle the grounds of Hogwarts. Filius, please demonstrate the requisite charms."

"These are nothing like the wards on the Manor," Draco remarked in a whisper.

"This is old, elemental magic," Flitwick told him. "Fascinating stuff. The charms involved are highly complex, yet they have aspects..."

"Filius," Snape said sharply, "later. I would rather not allow these wards to slip."

"Oh, good heavens, no! Sorry, Severus. You do your bit; everyone else, watch me and copy my wand movements."

The strands seemed slippery and insubstantial, and Hermione found that it took a great deal of concentration and careful wand work to gather them and twist them together. Eventually there were four thick, shining ropes of pure magic linking each house representative to the castle. Snape then guided his own rope (shaded subtly green, Hermione noticed) to Draco and strode to the centre of the chamber. As he directed the magical cables to twine around one another, she saw that the Ravenclaw magic shone a pearly blue, the Hufflepuff strands were faintly suffused with gold and Gryffindor's pulsed with a hint of scarlet.

Snape stood with his feet braced apart, both hands wrapped around the shaft of his dark wood wand as he knitted the great seams of tangible magic together. Hermione had never seen anything like this. Duelling wizards threw magic at one another...she had watched Harry and Ron duel often enough, and even joined in on occasion...but this was different; this was a vastly powerful force under total control.

He was not a large man. She remembered how he had loomed over her when she was a student, but she realised that he was actually shorter than Draco. He had put on only a few pounds in weight; Snape was still lean and ascetic, but no-one could deny the force of his personality or his magic. She could see sweat gleaming on his face, the slight tremor in the muscles of his arms and the total concentration in his black eyes as he twined the magic of the four houses together. Then he paused, took in a deep breath, and cast the great shining rope away. It rippled, thinning like elastic as it stretched, and its vibrations created a high, sweet, humming note like the dying echo of phoenix song. Hermione's scalp tingled, and she could feel the strands of loose hair writhing around her head as they escaped from their bun. A few seconds later, the end of the rope reappeared through the opposite wall. Snape caught it with the tip of his wand and brought the two ends together. There was a shower of sparks, a whiff of ozone (fresh, invigorating and sharp, like the wind blowing over fresh snow), and the shining rope that was the visible aspect of the wards sank into the floor and vanished.

Snape replaced his wand in his sleeve and turned to McGonagall. "Minerva, you will find that the wards are now in full operational order."

She held up her wand, frowning, and concentrated for a moment. "They are indeed. Thank you, Severus. That was a most remarkable display of magic."

Flitwick and Sprout murmured their agreement.

"Didn't you do that with Professor Dumbledore?" Hermione asked, and Flitwick laughed.

"Each headmaster or headmistress calls on the wards to appear in a form that they are most comfortable with. Albus believed in incantations, howling winds, flights of coloured fire and thunder. Scared the pants off me the first time I helped raise the wards."

"It was meant to be impressive," Sprout agreed. "Albus was always very Gryffindor."

Snape snorted. "I suppose multicoloured snakes were to be expected from a Slytherin."

"They weren't snakes, were they? Not quite. I imagine that you've gone off snakes somewhat." Flitwick asked the question with his little head cocked, without guile or intent to cause distress.

Snape allowed himself to smile. "Indeed, Filius, I have."

"I instructed the elves to prepare lunch in the staffroom," McGonagall said briskly, leading the way up the stairs. "Hermione, Severus, Draco, I'd be delighted if you'd join us."

"I must decline; I've a business meeting this afternoon, and I need to go through my paperwork," Draco said immediately, "but thanks for the offer."

They clambered out the trapdoor and Flitwick levitated the stone slab back into position. Draco bowed and strode out the main door.

McGonagall turned to face Snape, lifting an eyebrow at him in a manner that eerily echoed his own expression. For just an instant, so fast that she barely registered the movement, he glanced aside at Hermione.

"I'd love to stay for lunch," Hermione said.

"I might as well assuage your obvious curiosity," Snape remarked, sounding slightly put-upon.

As Hermione made her way through the castle next to the garrulous Sprout, who was happily describing her garden, she noticed that Snape had fallen into step with Flitwick. The retired Charms master's hands moved like fluttering birds as he talked about the aftermath of the war.

Had he really agreed to stay to be interrogated because she, Hermione know-it-all Granger, wanted to have lunch with her old teachers? How very strange!

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 6

Some elves get hooked on watching reruns of the great detectives, an investigation into the dodgy breeding of pedigree Crups leads Hermione and Severus into Lucius Malfoy's bed via the bath, Severus goes back to Hogwarts to retrieve his wand, Delilah Derwent, bastion of pure-blood aristocracy, arrives with her Knickers under one arm to play hanky-panky with Malfoy's Magic Wand, a Crup goes bad and some left-over Death Eaters get their comeuppance. Oh, and of course, Severus gets his just desserts.

She could not get the image of Snape out of her head. Her youthful crush on Lockhart aside, Hermione had always been more attracted to wizards with character rather than mere good looks. She had been intrigued by Krum's air of dangerous mystery, then for a while, she had thought she was destined to be with Ron until she realised that his boyish charm held a great deal more boyishness than charm. At the time, she had been very hurt when he told her that he had fallen for the girl next door actually, the girl in the next room, as Molly had invited Luna and Xenophilius to live at the Burrow until their house was rebuilt.

Hermione remembered a long evening spent with Ginny and Harry and far too much alcohol and chocolate, wondering where she had gone wrong.

"You haven't," Ginny said finally. "He's gone for the safe option, that's all. I know Luna's a bit well, scatty and odd, but ~~he~~ knows her, we've known her since we were small."

"He knows me," Hermione had lamented, "and I thought I knew him."

Harry shifted uncomfortably and both witches looked at him. He shrugged.

"Sorry, Ginny, but I think your mum might have influenced him."

Ginny gave a little snort. "Yeah, I think so too. Lucky for me that she likes you, hey, green-eyes?"

"She's never been quite sure about me," Hermione agreed. "When she thought I was Harry's girlfriend and I'd dumped him, remember? She believed everything written about me in *The Prophet* and *Witch Weekly*."

"We need to find you someone," Ginny declared, fuelled by wine and her delight in the new ring gleaming on her finger. "What do you want from your wizard, Hermione, apart from a big cock?"

Harry had spluttered into his lager while Ginny and Hermione wrote the curriculum vitae for her ideal wizard.

She now recalled how she had demanded intelligence, wit, self-awareness and self-discipline, compassion, a love for books and esoteric knowledge, and a passionate, academic interest that they could share. She had assumed that she was reacting to the loss of Ron as a potential partner, desiring the qualities that he lacked, and she still fantasised about meeting a man who could match or surpass her own intellect.

"Oh, bollocks," she said, "I think I've found him."

Hermione was met at the door of number twelve, Grimmauld Place by a disgruntled Kojak, carrying an even more disgruntled eagle owl on one shoulder. The owl had obviously been instructed to wait for a reply and was not happy about it. It stuck out one leg, tried to peck her as she removed its message, and then deliberately knocked Kojak's sunglasses to the floor with its wing.

Lucius Malfoy requested her presence to discuss the investigation into the Crup-breeding practices of his rivals. Well, she had been looking for a distraction, and it was safer to fantasise about Lucius Malfoy in riding breeches than Snape in the nude, as that was even less likely to lead to anything. She scribbled a reply and sent the owl on its way, then went to deal with the morning owl post and Floo calls.

Waspish met her at the front door of Malfoy Manor and bowed her inside.

"Master is with Master Professor Snape," he said, "they is fighting."

"What?" Hermione stared at the elf in alarm.

"They is in the duelling room," he explained. "Does Miss wish to wait or go up to watch?"

"Oh, I see. I'll watch, please."

The duelling room was thick with protective wards and enchantments that felt strong enough to contain even the Unforgiveable curses. In the centre, in the marked-out rectangle of a duelling arena, the two wizards hurled hexes and jinxes faster than she could see. Both men had stripped to trousers and shirtsleeves, both had tied back their hair, both were sweating as they cast and feinted.

"Point!" Malfoy exclaimed as Snape's ankles sprouted little wings like Mercury's.

"Bastard!" Snape panted, banishing the wings in a cloud of tiny feathers.

"You're the one " Malfoy leaped aside as a hex crackled past his ear, "who wanted to give your old wand a workout! Ouch!" As he turned, Hermione saw a flock of woodpeckers clinging to the back of his shirt, busily pecking away.

"Point!"

Hermione had seen top duellists at the Aurors' regular tournaments, and she sometimes practised with Harry, Ron and their friends, just to keep her hand in. Even though Snape and Malfoy were messing about, they were impressively fast.

Then something changed. She was unsure what triggered the reaction, but Snape and Malfoy attacked simultaneously. There were no flashy tentacles or flocks of birds now, just a flurry of curses, any one of which was capable of maiming. Slicing hexes, explosions, blood-boiling curses and many that she did not recognise flew through the air. The wards sparkled and spat as magic bounced off them.

Although Snape was shorter and slighter than the fast, vicious Lucius Malfoy, it seemed after a time that Snape had the edge. Malfoy was forced to rely more and more on his shielding spells, defending and dodging rather than attacking. Eventually, his blond hair all loose, tangled and damp with sweat, Malfoy took a slice to his momentarily unshielded arm and lost his temper.

"*Crucio!*"

Snape let out a startled grunt as the Unforgiveable slammed into his shielding spell and partially penetrated it. Hermione drew her wand, but before she could intervene, Snape dropped to the floor, rolled and cast beneath Malfoy's shields.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Malfoy's wand spun out of his hand, and he slammed back against the wall. Snape pushed himself to his feet, took a deep breath and visibly reined in his anger.

"If you ever cast an Unforgiveable at me again, Malfoy, I'll *leviscerate* you!"

"You would, too, wouldn't you? Damn it, look, I'm bleeding all over the place!"

"You should practice shielding on the move."

Malfoy clambered upright and then appeared to notice Hermione for the first time.

"Miss Granger, how good of you to respond to my invitation so quickly."

He *Accio-ed* his wand, pointed it at his arm and murmured, "Episkey," watching as the shallow cut vanished into his pale skin.

"Miss Granger," Snape said rather stiffly. "Kindly excuse us while we shower and change. I was not expecting an audience."

"That's all right," Hermione said. She was feeling just a little light-headed. She had never seen Snape in such a dishevelled and informal state. His damp shirt was sticking to him, displaying the sinewy musculature of his shoulders and his flat belly. Tendrils of his hair had come loose and beads of perspiration trickled down his face.

She could smell him. She had always been aware of his scent, a mixture of potions and that old-fashioned kind of aftershave or cologne worn by her grandfather and his friends: leather and bay rum and wood. It was enhanced now by the tang of fresh sweat on a hot body. Damn it, but she wanted to lick his throat.

"I believe that Miss Granger doesn't mind at all," Malfoy purred. His eyes gleamed with a slight, sharp hint of mischievousness that skirted the edge of malice.

"I don't dislike the aroma of testosterone," Hermione agreed. She was still watching Snape's neck. Just between the edges of his open collar was a ridge of silver scar tissue, the legacy of Nagini.

There was a moment of stillness.

Malfoy snapped his fingers.

"Waspish, prepare a hot bath in the green bathroom. Miss Granger, would you care to join us?"

Snape's breath came out in a startled hiss, immediately cut off.

"Lucius," he said with a clear note of warning.

"Miss Granger is a witch who knows her own mind. She knows that she is safe with us."

"For certain definitions of the word 'safe'," Hermione agreed. Her heart was thumping in her chest and her fingers tingled.

"Then the game is on, Miss Granger."

"No."

Both wizards stared at her: Snape's eyes narrowed in suspicion, Malfoy's widened in surprise.

"No?"

Hermione shook her head. "This isn't a competition, gentlemen. I refuse to be fought over like some some mediaeval princess whose hand is given to the most reckless and macho prince of the lot."

Malfoy was genuinely shocked, which was a rather novel and unappealing look for him, while Snape's lips curved into an equally authentic appreciation.

"My dear Miss Granger, aren't you being just a trifle greedy?"

"I prefer to call it 'audacious', Professor Snape."

"I'm not your "

"You haven't resigned, my friend," Malfoy reminded him. "You're still Headmaster of Hogwarts, so the title's still yours."

"Sod off, Lucius."

"Language, Severus, we've a lady to impress."

"That will not be as easy as you seem to think," Snape remarked, casting a glance at Hermione out of the corners of his dark eyes, a glance that ran across her skin like a trickle of Firewhisky.

"Oh, I don't know," Malfoy murmured, "I'd very much like to try. It seems that our young friend has gained a taste for bad boys."

"Speak for yourself. Some of us saw the error of our ways faster than others."

"No need to rub it in," Malfoy said, then leered.

"You think you're still mad, bad and dangerous to know, do you?" Hermione enquired sweetly.

"You're not equating Lucius with bloody Byron, are you?" Snape sounded quite offended at the idea while Malfoy looked enquiringly at him.

"You're the Bryonic hero, Professor."

Snape scowled. "Stop calling me that."

"What shall I call you, then?"

"If we're going to share a bath, we really should be on first-name terms, don't you think?" Lucius said. "Come along *Hermione*, this way."

Hermione's brain was a jumble of thoughts, a state which would normally cause her some distress. It flitted from the trivial did I put my nice lace underwear on today? to the practical must remember my contraceptive charms and do I need an anti-STD charm with this pair? to the frankly lewd oh god, do they bugger one another? *Please*, can I watch?

"Miss Granger "

"Hermione."

"Hermione, are you sure that you wish to do this?" Snape spoke softly as he walked beside her. She was hyper-aware of him, the heat of his body, his scent, the way his dark hair clung to his neck.

"Of course I am."

"Gryffindor," he muttered.

"Suggesting what? That I'd shag you for a dare?"

The slight widening of his eyes was the only indication that she had hit the mark. About to berate him, she stopped herself just in time. This wasn't the arrogant Malfoy, this was Snape, who had carried a chip on his shoulder since the age of eleven and whose insecurities were a mile wide.

"I'm doing it because I want to," she said gently.

"I understand lusting after Lucius; most wizards would give a lot for that degree of elegant machismo." He glanced at his friend's back, at the broad shoulders tapering down to that tight, shapely arse, and Hermione felt a spike of sheer want striking down through her belly.

"He's gorgeous," Hermione agreed, "but so are you."

He snorted a mixture of amusement and disbelief. "I know what I am, Hermione."

"No, you obviously don't."

"Really? A skinny ex-Death Eater with a nose you could use to cut wood?"

Hermione shrugged. "So why would you want a bushy-haired know-it-all with buck teeth?"

"Meanwhile," Lucius said loudly, "the elegant wizard with the very large prick is wondering when you'll finish insulting yourselves. I'm aware that this is your idea of foreplay, but I find the bickering rather off-putting."

"So sorry," Snape snapped and folded his arms. "Perhaps you'd like to get on with your games while I go back to work."

"No you don't," Malfoy said. "You're not losing your nerve at this stage of the proceedings. Hermione, if we insisted that you chose between us, you'd choose Severus, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," she said at once.

"There you are. Now stop wibbling and come along."

Snape stared at her, a mixture of suspicion and interest in his eyes. He clearly wanted to believe her.

"Lucius is the one I'd have a naughty fling with," she told them. "He'd sweep me off my feet with champagne and roses and a night of passion, and then he'd get bored and go looking for his next conquest." Malfoy mimed distress, clasping a hand to his heart, while his eyes glittered in cool amusement. Then she turned to look at Snape. "But you're the wizard I'd want to spend evenings with by the fire reading a good book, or brewing potions, or walking in the mountains, or lingering over a glass of wine and talking about everything and anything." Hermione thought over what she had just said and blushed while Malfoy smirked.

"There you are, Severus, the witch has damn near proposed to you. What are you waiting for? Your problem," Malfoy added, "is too much analysis and not enough sex."

"Chance of enough sex would be a fine thing," Snape muttered, but he allowed Hermione to slide her arm through his. The heat and the whipcord muscles of his forearm under her hand made her heart pound.

The green bathroom derived its name not from the colour of the room, but from its plethora of foliage. Gorgeous lilies, ferns and even a couple of small palm trees grew in urns and pots, while jasmine, orchids and stephanotis hung from the iron supports of a huge skylight.

"Narcissa used to keep her parakeets in here," Malfoy remarked, ushering them inside, "but she took them with her and I didn't replace them. Damn things would keep crapping on the towels and dropping feathers in the bath."

"One does rather expect to hear a chorus of tropical frogs," Snape said. There was something in his voice that made Hermione look at him: a note of wry self-deprecation. Malfoy patted his shoulder in an absent-minded fashion as he passed and Snape shrugged. "I spent my summer holidays with Lucius after my mother died. I was in my last couple of years at Hogwarts," he explained. "I would have killed to live in a home a tenth as luxurious as this. One of the factors that led to my making a regrettable decision was sheer envy."

"Hm, you might not have enjoyed living here when his lordship took over. Envy on the part of many Death Eaters took the form of destructive rages fuelled by the contents of my wine cellar. Did you know that they roasted my peacocks and tried to make the Crups hunt Muggles?" Lucius shuddered and pointed his wand at the door, closing and locking it. "There now, let's draw a line under the past and concentrate on the present and immediate future, shall we? Hermione, my dear, we are both under your direction." He gave a slight bow towards her. "What would you like us to do?"

Slytherin, she thought, *he's a Slytherin, and so there has to be an ulterior motive here* But there was nothing that he could have said or done that could so effectively banish her remaining scruples. Lucius was such a practiced seducer of witches that he could sense her carefully suppressed misgivings, and he realised that handing over control would boost her confidence. Snape was watching his friend with his usual guarded expression, but Hermione suspected that he was as surprised as she was.

"I mean it," Lucius said softly, and Hermione clenched her hands and took a deep breath.

Her senses were on high alert, as sensitive and attuned to her environment as if she was under magical attack. She reminded herself that she was a Gryffindor and asked the question that was throbbing at the base of her throat, as if the words were trying to push themselves up her windpipe and out of her mouth.

"Have you ever kissed one another?"

As she expected, Lucius had never schooled himself to suppress his thoughts or emotions why should he, when his position of privilege meant that house-elves and family had always danced to his tune? His grey eyes flared wide but she detected only astonishment there, not revulsion.

In Snape, surprise manifested only as the further darkening of already dark eyes. His gaze flickered to Malfoy for just an instant, assessing the other wizard's reaction, and that alone revealed what she wanted to know.

No, they had never kissed, for if they had, Snape would have no need to watch Malfoy because he would know how his friend would react. Malfoy was surprised but not displeased, possibly interested, certainly not dismissive, but Snape had closed off after that first momentary shock.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said before either man could respond.

"For what?" Malfoy asked, curious.

"I don't want to ruin your friendship."

"Why should you?"

"Miss Granger is making assumptions," Snape said. He sounded irritable; a sudden regression to the acerbic teacher, and Malfoy raised both blond eyebrows.

"Assumptions, Severus? That we had, or that we hadn't?"

"That we would wish to," Snape snapped, raising his chin high. Malfoy gave a slight twitch, not quite a flinch, which he covered well by indicating surprise, but Hermione thought that he was dismayed by the comment.

"Why wouldn't we?" Malfoy asked curiously. "I'm not averse to the experiment. Hermione, why did you assume that it would damage our friendship?"

Snape made a slight sound, as if at the last instant, he thought better of making a snort of annoyance or disdain.

Hermione stared wide-eyed at the pair of them. Did they *not know*? Was it a requirement of masculinity, that men should display the emotional range of a teaspoon?

"I doubt if Miss Granger even realises," Snape muttered, and that sparked anger in her, that he should think that she was clueless.

"Lucius can't understand why it matters because, in general, Lucius gets what he wants," she said, and because she was annoyed at him, she ploughed on with her explanation despite Snape's darkening scowl. "Severus, on the other hand, wants it but is afraid that if he gets it, he'll lose what he already has, and has retreated into a defensive position because that's safer than taking a risk."

"Enough!" Snape spat, fully reverted to his evil-teacher persona, but the damage was done.

"You want to kiss me?" Malfoy whispered. "Truly?"

"Forget it, Lucius. Granger is getting above herself!"

Malfoy grasped his friend's elbow and forced him around so that they were face to face.

"But why didn't you say?"

"Because I'm damned if I'll be discarded along with your other toys!" His eyes glittered, and he bared his uneven teeth in a snarl of anger and pain.

"No," Malfoy whispered, "never. We've been through too much together for that." Wondering, he brought up one hand and slid it alongside Snape's jaw, up the side of his pale, set face, until the fingers meshed into his hair, and then he brought his mouth down onto Snape's.

Hermione thought that her heart was going to stutter to a halt in her chest, or else burst out in a great surge of excitement. For perhaps ten seconds very long, palpitating seconds Snape was as unyielding as a stone statue, and then he made the faintest of sounds, a hint of his voice in an exhalation, and his hands came up and he clutched at Malfoy's shoulders and his response was everything Hermione could have hoped for and more. He was so overwhelmed that he probably didn't realise that he was humping against the taller man's thigh, not that Malfoy seemed to mind.

Snape must have known that he was going to lose it, display his need and his vulnerability, but he had not counted on Malfoy's reaction. When Snape's hand moved down and pressed against his crotch, Malfoy pulled away from the kiss with a groan.

"Sweet Merlin, stop!"

Snape stared at him through narrowed eyes, chest heaving, face flushed and his lips parted. Malfoy was not a fool. He touched Snape's mouth with the tip of one finger. "I haven't come in my pants since I was fifteen, and I'm damned if I'll do it now, even for you!"

Snape's shoulders relaxed, and he turned to stare at Hermione through strands of unruly black hair.

"Are you satisfied with the results of your experiment, Miss Granger?"

"If you call me that once more, I'll hex your balls crimson and gold."

Malfoy laughed, more in a release of tension than amusement, and patted Hermione's arm.

"My dear girl, wait until you've sampled the goods before you leave your mark on them!"

Snape's hand dipped down to adjust himself in his black woollen trousers, a quick, darting movement that drew Hermione's attention to his erection.

"Unless you'd rather I wasn't even here?" she ventured to ask. She had spent too many evenings feeling like the unnecessary third wheel with Harry and Ginny, and then, once her friendship with Ron had recovered, with him and Luna.

Snape said nothing, but for once, Malfoy picked up on his reluctance to state his own desires.

"I very much want you to stay," he purred, "and Severus does, too."

Snape gave a single sharp nod and then directed a narrow-eyed sideways look at Hermione.

"Hermione appears to be something of a pervert," he remarked, emphasising his use of her name. The fact that she recognised his insecurity did not mean that she had to let him walk all over her as she was sure he would, given the opportunity.

"I'm sure you've been to the Two-Wands Club, in Knockturn Alley," she said lightly, "where wizards seem to take great delight in watching two attractive witches kissing, fondling and disrobing each other. Where's the difference?"

"Hmph," Malfoy smoothed back an errant lock of his hair, "your so-called friends told you about that place, did they?"

Hermione gave him what she hoped was a wide-eyed, guileless smile.

"No, I've been there."

"Trying to shut it down?" Malfoy asked, rather grumpily.

"What on earth for? The Muggle world has far worse dens of vice and iniquity than a slightly naughty and rather quaint cabaret club; ask Severus if you don't believe me."

"I'm surprised they let you in. The membership is restricted to wizards only."

"And how many witches do you see serving the food, fetching the drinks, singing or taking their robes off on-stage? They don't allow house-elves."

"Seeing how the other half lives, were you?"

She suppressed an urge to smack his handsome arrogant face.

"We didn't all inherit our money, you know!"

"Lucius," Snape said, sounding exasperated, "the witch runs a detective agency, in case you'd forgotten!"

Obviously he had, although she was mollified when he gave a bow in her direction.

"I apologise, Hermione. Of course, you're right; they don't allow elves on the premises to prevent wives sending their elves to check up on errant husbands."

"Exactly. I was searching for a missing witch, and she was last seen entering the Two-Wands."

"Did you find her?" Snape enquired.

"Yes, she was part of a witch and wizard singing duo and hadn't told her family because she was embarrassed at working there "

"I should think so," Malfoy muttered.

" and she'd fallen for her singing partner and run off with him."

"Dear, dear," Malfoy said. "Some witches should never be allowed out alone."

Hermione realised Snape was failing to disguise his smirk, uttering, "Bastard," in a bored voice. She took a deep breath. Perhaps mentioning Malfoy's failure to control his mad sister-in-law would not be tactful at this point. She caught a flashing glance between the two wizards, a message passed so swiftly and efficiently that it spoke volumes about their mutual understanding.

"Now," Malfoy murmured, "we appear to have veered so wildly away from our initial aim that I wonder if you are as interested in our tryst as you claim." He slipped his wand out of his sleeve and balanced it on the low marble bench next to the pool. "There, as a gesture of good faith." His raised an eyebrow and slowly, Snape followed his lead and placed his ash and cherry wand next to Malfoy's. Hermione realised that the bench had little channels carved in its surface for that very purpose.

She drew her vinewood wand and put it between the other two. Lucius nodded, and she heard Snape let out a faint exhalation. Hermione suspected that she had taken part in a Wizarding custom that now committed her to having sex. Somewhere in her conscience, the loud cursing from her mental images of Ron and Harry and the cries of horror from Molly and Percy Weasley were drowned out by Ginny and Luna, urging her on.

"Good for you girl! Go for it!" Ginny crowed, while Luna danced in a circle and flapped her hands in delight.

"It's our turn to ask you for something," Malfoy whispered, and she realised that he had silently moved up behind her and was speaking close against her ear. "I should like to ask the same of you; I should like to see you kiss Severus."

She looked into Snape's eyes, seeking his consent. His eyelids lowered and his gaze sharpened a subtle tell, but enough to encourage her. She took a couple of steps to face him. She was aware of everything around her: the sharp sound of her heels on the marble floor, the humid air, the whisper of her robes as they brushed against her stockings, and the tang of his scent. She put her fingertips to his face, rough with a hint of stubble.

This time, he was neither shocked nor passive. He reached out, grasped her upper arms and pulled her against his chest, his mouth seeking hers. His tongue swiped across her mouth and she opened her lips to him.

A little voice inside her head chanted, "I'm kissing Severus Snape! I'm kissing Severus Snape!" and Ron and Harry and Molly and Percy babbled in condemnation and then fell silent and nothing else mattered, only her tongue and his, retreating and advancing in their duel of pleasure.

"For the sake of comparison..." Malfoy said from somewhere behind her and gently tugged her shoulder to turn her.

His kiss was assured and polished, testing out what she liked and giving it, considerate but in control. It was easy to respond, but she was so, so glad that she had kissed Snape first. When he pulled back, he smiled at her, his grey eyes assessing her with surprising approval. She realised that for the first time, she and Malfoy were in complete accord. This was not about her romantic fantasies or his libido, it was about Snape.

Malfoy flicked the top button of her robe out of its hole.

"My dear, we're all wildly overdressed for the occasion."

She responded by unbuttoning his shirt while reaching out for Snape and attempting to do the same for him, albeit left-handed and rather awkwardly. His slender fingers folded onto hers, stilling them, then he made a sharp gesture at his shirt and the garment fell open.

"Of course," Malfoy said, "someone who wears so many buttons needs to be in command of them."

"I've a spell for everything while you have house-elves."

"I was looking forward to unwrapping you," Hermione said, allowing herself to pout.

"What a splendid idea, Hermione! Severus definitely needs to be unwrapped. In fact, I shall watch while you unwrap each other."

Malfoy seated himself on the bench next to the wands with his legs sprawled, unconcerned that his trousers pulled taut and outlined the shape of his erection.

"Voyeur," Snape muttered, but did not protest as Hermione pushed his open shirt off his shoulders; instead, he reached for the fastenings of her robe.

He moved slowly, offering light, tantalising touches as his hands drifted down over her breasts. The skin of her stomach tightened in anticipation as his knuckles skimmed lower. He worked each button out of its hole with maddening exactitude. His breath puffed hot against her ear, and she looked down at the fine trail of black hair leading to the waistband of his trousers and the zipper straining over his cock. *Muggle trousers*, she thought, and was pleased that her brain was still capable of such a fine distinction.

She tried to undo his trousers with a precision to match his, easing the tongue of the buckle out of the leather belt and then unhitching the button of the waistband. His breathing deepened. She lowered the zip so slowly that she felt each individual snick and his hand shook just a fine, barely perceptible tremor against her hip. Malfoy shifted slightly, knocking against one of the wands so that it tapped against the side of its marble recess.

Hermione concentrated on the moment, fixing it in the Pensieve of her memory for all time: the contrast between the cool marble walls and lush greenery, the anticipation and gathering excitement, the palpating delicacy of Snape's fingers brushing her skin, barely stirring the fine hairs. Separate from them, yet an overt presence in the room, Malfoy watched and waited.

She had worn her best underwear, though whether from instinct, wishful thinking or just to boost her confidence, she did not know. Snape gently drew her robe back and down, revealing her lacy red bra, matching knickers and suspender belt.

Hermione, unused to being assessed for anything other than her intellect, had nothing to hide behind and felt a wash of heat that she knew must be blushing over her entire body. If only she had taken Ginny up on her offer to coach her in Quidditch! She could have lost that inch around her waist and toned her thighs, she should have tamed her hair and worked on her tan and

"Delectable," Malfoy sighed.

"Indeed."

Had neither wizard even noticed her nervousness? She took in a deep breath and Snape, who was gazing at her cleavage, swallowed audibly.

"Thank Merlin I didn't know what you were hiding under your robes when I was teaching you."

"I've put on weight since then," Hermione said ruefully. "That's the trouble with an office job mmmh!"

Snape seized her, pulled her against himself and kissed her until they were forced to pull apart to breathe. He ran his hands down her ribs, over her hips, then back up again until he cupped her breasts lightly in his hands.

"Don't you dare apologise for these," he told her.

"Great Circe, no," Malfoy said from behind them. "Is it inconsistent of me to state how much I love female Muggle undergarments? On the right female... or off the right female being even better, of course. That is a *hint*, Severus."

Hermione felt Malfoy's hand slide across her arse. For some reason, Snape's touch was appreciative while Malfoy's was proprietorial. She swung around, eyes narrowed, and found him naked and highly amused, his cock waving jauntily.

"I cannot for the life of me understand why that idiot Weasley boy didn't snap you up when he had the chance," he remarked.

"He felt threatened," Snape said at once, and Hermione must have imitated a stranded fish as she gaped from one to the other.

"By me?"

"Of course by you, silly girl." The term was affectionate rather than derogatory. "He spent his school years playing the dumb sidekick; I very much doubt he wanted more of the same in his marriage."

"But I tried so hard not to make him feel stupid."

"Exactly!" Malfoy said. "We Slytherins, on the other hand, have always admired intelligence, in males and females, friends or rivals."

"Luna was a Ravenclaw, and she's very perceptive," Hermione muttered. Snape grasped her chin and turned her to face him.

"She's also so whimsical that she needs him to keep her grounded," he told her. "He didn't want someone who made him feel stupid by just being there. If you'd remained with him and pandered to his insecurity, your brain would have atrophied and you'd have ended up like Molly, popping out children every couple of years just to give yourself a new project."

"Merlin forbid," Malfoy said with a shudder. "Now look what you've done, mentioning the Weasley matriarch." He indicated his slightly wilted cock.

"So sorry," Snape said with patent lack of conviction.

"You're wearing too much," Hermione told him. "I was supposed to be undressing you, if you recall."

Snape spread his arms and indicated that she should go ahead. As she eased his trousers down over his thighs, she sank down onto her heels and heard Malfoy draw in a sharp breath, and realised that her dainty lace knickers were stretching tightly across her arse. She wriggled slightly just to make him gasp again.

Her inadvertent display of uncertainty had clearly given Snape confidence. He placed a hand lightly on her shoulder for balance as she lifted his foot to remove his trousers, his white underpants and his sock and shoe. When she looked up, she met all the weight of his regard.

His eyes were no longer bleak and cold; his gaze had opened, expressing so much hope and desire that she was stunned. His Occlumency shields had gone, and only now did she realise that he had held them in place throughout her schooldays. Such terrible self-control must have cost him dearly in the years that followed Voldemort's downfall, and she was amazed that he had retained any emotional integrity at all.

He held down a hand to assist her to her feet, and then, he reached around behind her to unfasten her bra. Her bared nipples brushed the sparse hairs on his chest as he allowed the flimsy garment to fall.

"A hundred points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger."

The base of her belly tightened, and she felt hot and dizzy with want. He noted her reaction and continued to speak, his voice pitched low, rich and rare, as seductive as the finest coffee laced with cream and a dash of brandy.

"My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;

Coral is far more red than her lips' red..."

When he had finished the poem, Malfoy asked quietly, "What was that?"

Hermione whispered, "Shakespeare's sonnet number one hundred and thirty," and Snape smiled at her with the utmost satisfaction, and she knew that she had met his highest expectation at last.

He unfastened her suspender belt and slid his hands down to carry her stockings and knickers to the floor, squatting on his heels to lift her feet, one at a time, out of her shoes and her underwear.

Apparently, Malfoy was not allowing himself to be relegated to the background any longer. When Hermione turned away from Snape for a moment, she saw Malfoy standing at the edge of the sunken pool. Little tendrils of vapour were rising from the surface, and his long blond hair was beginning to darken in the steam. He smirked at her, snapped his fingers and extended his hand. With a faint pop, a silver tray appeared balanced upon his outstretched palm, carrying three, slender, crystal flute glasses and a bottle of champagne. He transferred the tray to the marble bench with a flourish and removed the wire cage from the cork.

"Here is your champagne, my lady. This room is too hot for roses, but I can supply orchids and lilies to strew at your feet."

Hermione took the glass that he offered her and gave a little curtsy.

"Thank you, kind sir."

"Hm," Snape gazed critically at the bottle. "Pink champagne, Lucius?"

Malfoy sighed theatrically.

"My dear chap, please! This is a Dom Ruinart elf-made rosé, vintage 1998."

"The year that the Dark Lord fell," Hermione said.

"Exactly. I have been assiduously restocking my wine cellar ever since." He took an appreciative sip and held the wine in his mouth for a moment before swallowing.

Snape rolled his eyes but did not refuse the glass that Malfoy held out to him.

The wine was crisp and cold, the bubbles bursting into flavour on Hermione's tongue. "Nice," she declared, just to see Malfoy suppress a wince.

"Ruinart is one of the oldest established champagne houses," he said reproachfully.

"Mm," Hermione agreed. "I know. Nicholas Ruinart began producing champagne in 1729, although I hadn't realised that the house had a Wizarding side, too. The balance between red fruits, licorice and citrus is even finer in the elf-made vintage, isn't it? Or have you not tried the Muggle version?"

"Ruinart was reputed to be a wizard," Malfoy said, "and I haven't tried the Muggle rosé."

"Told you she was a know-it-all," Snape muttered.

Hermione smiled, not wishing to admit that her parents loved fine wine and had taken her on holiday to French vineyards as soon as she was old enough to appreciate them. She needed every advantage she could get.

Lucius strode to the side of the pool and descended into the water, sipping from his champagne flute. He moved smoothly and effortlessly; Hermione had to remind herself that he was in his early fifties and that Snape was forty eight.

He turned and held out his hand to her, which she accepted, realizing there was a flight of marble steps leading down into the pool.

The water was blissfully hot, and the steam carried a hint of perfume. She breathed deeply, trying to identify the individual components.

"Vanilla," she said, "frankincense, sandalwood, musk, cassia and some sort of citrus - bergamot, perhaps?"

"Just relax and enjoy it," Malfoy murmured as he drew her close against his body. "Honestly, woman, you're as bad as Severus!"

She felt Snape's hands on her head, pulling out the pins that held her hair in its customary bun, and then he ran his fingers through the unruly mass of curls as they uncoiled like suddenly-released springs.

"I like your hair," Snape said. "It suggests that you have an uninhibited side after all. Let's see if you live up to its promise."

Snape Summoned a bottle of shampoo. She noted that he worked the minor spell wandlessly while Malfoy needed to pick up the soap and sponge from a ledge under the rim of the bath, and she felt smug on Snape's behalf.

Not since she was a young child had anyone else bathed her, and even then, her parents had esteemed efficiency over pleasure. The perfumed water, the luscious champagne, the cadence of Snape's beautiful voice, the sight of the hothouse blooms and the wide expanses of marble... but most of all, it was the touch of skilled hands that stimulated her every sense. Why had she never asked anyone to massage her scalp? Snape's fingers worked through her hair, just hard enough, while Malfoy soaped her arms, her back, then lightly washed her breasts and swept the sponge lower, skimming her hips and abdomen. She was trembling by the time they had finished.

"And now," Malfoy asked, "what is your desire?" He was teasing her, refraining from touching the sponge to her inner thighs.

"Wash each other," she said rather breathlessly to his obvious amusement.

"My dear, you really are a little voyeur."

"You can talk," Snape told him, already pouring shampoo into his hand and reaching for Malfoy's hair.

Malfoy accepted someone else tending him as an indisputable right, while it was obvious that Snape was as self-sufficient as Hermione. Slowly, however, the warmth and the sensual nature of the activity worked their magic, and Snape relaxed, bowing his head as Hermione washed his hair and Malfoy massaged his friend's shoulders and back. Malfoy met Hermione's gaze as she cupped water to rinse Snape's hair, and his grey eyes warmed with approval. Hermione nodded in return. She neither sought nor needed his consent for anything, but he would be a vicious and unpredictable enemy, and for Snape's sake, she preferred that they maintain their current truce.

Malfoy ducked, allowing water from her hands to trickle across his face as he angled in below Snape's jaw, and drew his tongue across the raised knots of scar tissue on his throat. Snape shuddered and clutched at his friend's shoulders. Hermione kissed Snape's lips. They were warm and wet and hungry.

"Now," Malfoy said, "shall we retire to my bedroom?"

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 6

Some elves get hooked on watching reruns of the great detectives, an investigation into the dodgy breeding of pedigree Crups leads Hermione and Severus into Lucius Malfoy's bed via the bath, Severus goes back to Hogwarts to retrieve his wand, Delilah Derwent, bastion of pure-blood aristocracy, arrives with her Knickers under one arm to play hanky-panky with Malfoy's Magic Wand, a Crup goes bad and some left-over Death Eaters get their comeuppance. Oh, and of course, Severus gets his just desserts.

The little canine scampered along the verge of the narrow lane that wound through the hamlet of Western Piercy. A farmer, driving a smoke-belching Land Rover, wondered if it was one of old man Povey's Jack Russells that had escaped again and then shook his head. It had better not get into the cattle field; the old bull was in there. Soft as butter with people he knew, was Curly, but a right bugger with dogs; he could trample a little squirt like that into the ground as soon as look at it. Funny, it almost looked as if the thing had two tails. He glanced in the mirror but the dog had gone: it must have run into the hedge.

He wrenched the steering wheel round just in time, almost tipping the ancient vehicle into the ditch in his attempt to avoid the cat marching down the lane with its hair on end. Bloody hell! What was it with the animals around here today? What with the missus claiming she'd seen a white peacock flying across the orchard, and now dogs and cats acting like they owned the road. It wasn't as if he'd had more than a pint with his lunch, either! Oh well, the pigs weren't going to feed themselves, were they? Better get a move on if he was going to get the combine fixed this afternoon.

The brindle animal bared its teeth and shook itself before trotting busily on its way, the black shadow prowling close behind.

Hermione stretched out on the satin-shrouded bed, her hair bouncing around her head in a riot of curls.

"I did warn you what would happen if you used a drying charm," she remarked.

"You look perfect," her host purred, "the very picture of luxurious abandon."

She eyed him thoughtfully.

"I do not believe that your customary blarney is at all efficacious in the case of Hermione Granger," Snape said.

"Blarney?" Malfoy reared back, the picture of offended pride.

"The dilemma with sleeping with the enemy is they don't believe the flattery," Hermione said, then immediately winced at her lack of tact. "Sorry."

Malfoy magnanimously waved a hand. "Gryffindors are so refreshingly honest in their reactions, aren't they, Severus?"

"Yes," Snape said dryly. "The majority of them have always honestly hated us."

Malfoy pursed his lips and clicked his tongue.

"Perhaps we haven't always made it easy for them to love us. We might not wear our hearts on our sleeves, but we are prepared to give people the benefit of the doubt."

"You can't fault me in that," Hermione said strongly and reached out, seizing Snape by the hand. "I always wanted to believe in you, you know."

"You had an unhealthy tendency to afford your teachers a respect that they may not have deserved."

"In the case of Lockhart, yes, I admit it."

He muttered something in which she detected the word 'werewolf', but with a restraint that she considered to be admirably un-Gryffindor, she ignored it. Besides, he was climbing onto the bed, his dark eyes fixed upon her face. Hermione said "Accio wand," and he raised an eyebrow. "Contraceptive charm," she explained, and quickly cast the standard protective spells upon herself before placing the wand under the pillow.

"Good girl," he whispered as he lowered his head, huffing hot breath against her neck. "Another hundred points to Gryffindor, at the very least."

"You sly charmer oh!" His tongue traced the convolutions of her ear, while his hand smoothed over her hip, stroked her stomach, moving gradually to where she most wanted it to be. At last, his fingers slipped between her thighs, caressing the moist folds of skin.

She was vaguely aware of Malfoy seated nearby with his cock in one hand, leaning back and raising his champagne glass to his mouth. His grey eyes were languid, lazy and content. Then she forgot about him, forgot everything except Snape's hands and his mouth moving to cover her own mouth and his erect cock nudging at her body, seeking her permission to enter. She wrapped her legs around him, pulling him into her, and he sank home with a thrust of his hips and a groan of pleasure.

She could explain the act of coupling in scholarly language, but how could she describe the subtle nuances that made the difference between shagging and making love? Inextricably bound up in the sex was her relief at finding Snape alive, her appreciation of his obvious desire for her, her respect for him as both man and teacher, and her conviction that she was safe in his hands. Hermione did not love him, but she knew that she could very easily fall in love. She liked his intelligence and his wit, as sharp and accurate as a scalpel. She liked the way that he wanted to give her pleasure, and then lost everything except his true and honest desire for her body, and yet once he had come in her, he slipped out of her body and slid down her, still breathing hard from his exertions, and applied his tongue where no lover had ever licked her before. She squeaked in surprise, and then whimpered as the nerves in her already sensitized clitoris seemed to sparkle and flare with the most wonderful sensations. She babbled nonsense, calling upon all manner of deities, Muggle and Wizarding, riding a sweet, high wave of pleasure until she collapsed in a satiated heap.

"Bravo," Malfoy said, his voice sounding muted and distant, "a splendid performance."

Hermione did not bother to open her eyes.

"So responsive," Snape whispered. The bed dipped slightly as he stretched out beside her; she could feel the heat radiating from him and his elevated breathing. She was wondering dreamily whether Malfoy had already wanked himself to completion or whether she ought to offer to help him with the task when there was a loud pop and a distinctly elvish voice declared, "Waspish is sorry, Waspish will iron his ears for interrupting Master's hanky-panky, but Madam Delilah Derwent is here with her Knickers."

Hermione and Snape trailed down the stairs in Malfoy's wake, though in Hermione's case, trying unsuccessfully to tie her hair up into something resembling a bun.

"Don't worry," Snape whispered, "well-shagged is this season's new look," which did not help.

"Malfoy! Told you Knickers would be up for it by day eight; she always is, the little floozy!"

"Good afternoon, Madam," Malfoy said, unperturbed by the sight of at least ten Crups milling around in his hall. A very large witch in tweed robes held a brown and white Crup under one arm.

"Brought Fanny along for you to look at while I was at it, damn good little pup, ThreeWitches Fantasia, best solid red I've bred for an age. Fanny, where the buggerin' hell are you? There, what d'you think of that, Malfoy?"

A small chestnut Crup emerged from the pack and stood staring up at the witch, wagging its forked tail.

"Classic ThreeWitches head," Malfoy said thoughtfully. "Turn around, you. Yes, very tidy, good angulation, exceptional topline, nice tight feet. Who are you going to put her to?"

"Dick, of course, who else? If the old bugger can still cut the mustard by the time she's ready for a litter. Got to make her up first."

She appeared to notice Hermione and Snape and gazed curiously at them.

"This is the best pack of Crups you'll see in a lifetime," Malfoy said in a wistful voice. He pointed to the Crups with his wand. "That's Dual Champion ThreeWitches Clever Dick, Champion ThreeWitches Willy Win, to whom I gave a best in show last year, Champion Wiltshire's Humbug of ThreeWitches, Champion OwlTime Tennessee Whiskey of ThreeWitches "

"The American import," Hermione said and earned a nod of approval from Madam Derwent.

"Champion ThreeWitches Pernickety," he pointed to the Crup wriggling in the witch's grasp, "who is here to be mated to Wiltshire's Magic Wand, Junior Warrant winner ThreeWitches Thong, Champion ThreeWitches Wicked Intentions and Field Trial Champion ThreeWitches Bloomers."

"Hah!" Madam Derwent crowed. "Got you! Left Bloomer at home, been out huntin' all day and the old girl was knackered; this's her sister, Cami-knickers. Very similar, though Cami has the black patch on her left eye, Bloomer on the right." She turned to Hermione. "Damn good man with Crups, Malfoy, damn good. Never believed half of what they said about him, always said you can tell a wizard's character by the familiars he keeps." She glanced beyond Hermione at Snape and frowned. "You remind me of someone, young man. Can't think who it is. Never mind, it'll come to me, always does. Right, let's get this mating done."

Malfoy clapped his hands. "Portly!"

The elf appeared and bowed.

"This Crup is to be mated to Magic Wand. Accompany Madam Derwent to the kennels."

"You lot," Madam Derwent bellowed, "sit!"

Hermione found herself locking her knees; otherwise she would have plopped down on the floor together with the Crups.

"Behave yourselves, wait here, don't chew, don't piddle and shut up. I won't be long. Dick, Whiskey and Willy don't hump anything. Come on, Knickers, let's get you sorted. Lead on, elf."

The room seemed rather larger once she had swept out.

"Di Derwent has been the top breeder for the last fifty years," Malfoy said.

"Gosh," replied Hermione, who was wary of making derogatory remarks about their owner in the presence of the pack of Crups.

"This has been a most ... exceptional afternoon," Snape remarked.

"I had better go and assist, if you will excuse me?" Malfoy gave a little bow and followed the witch. The Crups moved towards the carpet in the middle of the hall, turning in circles and lying down, yawning and settling, some with their heads resting on the flanks of their friends.

Waspish appeared, glancing warily at the somnolent Crups.

"If Master and Miss wish, tea will be served in the parlour."

Only when there were three closed doors between herself and the pack did Hermione allow herself to giggle. Snape smiled at her, more relaxed than she had ever seen him.

"Sorry," she waved a hand. "Knickers? Does she have an underwear fetish?"

"I wouldn't care to speculate." He gave a delicate shudder. "Lucius has made some very strange friends."

They fell silent as they contemplated the truth of that, and Waspish arrived with a tea service, plates of sandwiches and cake.

Malfoy appeared after an hour, Madam Derwent surging along behind like a ship in full sail.

"No, no, I won't stop, thanks all the same, got to get back, ladies' night at the club, glad rags on and all that rot. For charity, you know, Crup and Kneazle rescue. I'll let you know about Knickers. Oh, forgot to mention, that blue Crup of yours, huntin' about outside the gates, still had its lead on, had your elf put it in the kennel next to your old girl. Unusual markin's, rather smart, wouldn't mind knowin' the breedin' behind that. Must dash, see you at the next committee meetin'."

"Madam, which Crup are you referring to?"

Malfoy's question was drowned by the yapping of excited Crups as they dashed to welcome their mistress, and then Madam Derwent was gone.

Hermione had a niggling feeling that she was missing something; she was trying to remember what it was as Malfoy called Portly and told him to investigate the strange Crup. Portly returned to the parlour leading the creature by a smart leather collar and leash.

"Oh," Hermione exclaimed, "that's the blue brindle! I meant to tell you, Sherlock noticed it hanging around in Western Piercy the other day."

The Crup dashed around in a circle and barked, pulling the leash out of the elf's hand.

"I've never seen a coat pattern like that before," Malfoy said. "Come here. Are you lost?"

It dodged as he reached out to it, then bowed with its rump stuck up in the air before skittering backwards, wagging. The Crup whirled around the room, as if delighted to have someone to interact with.

"An entire male," Malfoy mused. "Not a bad conformation, a little on the thin and rangy side, but not unhealthy; doesn't appear that young, but still playful. Must be a lost pet."

The Crup ran to Hermione, staring up at her out of bright eyes, like little, black buttons. She grasped the leash, and with surprising strength for such a compact animal, it yanked her forward so that she lost her balance for a moment. Snape caught her elbow. The Crup leaped, and before Hermione could let go, it barreled into Malfoy's leg. For a moment, Hermione held the leather loop, with the leash pulled tight against Snape's thigh and the Crup clamped its teeth firmly into the hem of Malfoy's robe. Then the wrenching pull of a Portkey caught them all and dragged them far away from the warm parlour of Malfoy Manor.

Hermione felt as if she was a rag doll, tossed around by a toddler in a tantrum before being thrown to the ground. She lay still, bruised and breathless, and the voice that had haunted her worst nightmares for the last decade made goose pimples rise along her arms and the back of her neck.

"Yes! Oh, fine boys, clever boys, yes! Oh, we shall have such fun! Look, look at them trembling! I clap my hands for you, I applaud you! Our Master would have been so glad! Oh, let me see, let me see them! Yes, the traitor, the coward and Potter's little bitch."

Hermione groped in her robe for her wand, but a hoarse voice yelled "Expelliarmus!" and the sliver of wood slipped between her fingers and was gone. As she looked around, she saw the brindle Crup leap in the air, swelling and contorting as it changed from canine into man a sneering man with dark hair streaked with grey.

She heard the dull, sickening sound of a foot striking flesh, and someone grunted in pain. Bellatrix Lestrange's voice, shrill with excitement, continued to rant from somewhere high above.

"Steady, Roddy, don't damage them yet. We need them awake first and then two can watch while we work slowly and carefully on the third. Make it slow, make every little cut and bruise count, my darling boys. We shall have our revenge on behalf of our Dark Lord. No, Rab, kick somewhere that doesn't matter, the knees might do; we wouldn't want anyone to bleed to death. That would be too quick. We have to make them last."

A foot hitched under Hermione's shoulder and rolled her onto her back. She was on a carpet so encrusted with dirt that it felt like lying on a gritty beach. Enough light penetrated the ragged curtains to show two figures, hunched over the prone forms of Malfoy and Snape, and a third face staring out of a frame on the wall. Bellatrix's portrait leered down over the bent backs of Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrange, and Hermione knew that basically, they were all fucked.

A blond witch walked through the door and declared, "I need to speak to the Minister at once." Her velvet robes with their fur collar must have cost a fortune from a Parisian couturier.

"That isn't possible," Percy Weasley said. She looked at him as if he was an item of furniture that had inexplicably taken to speech.

"You will find that it is."

Percy drew his wand, but he jumped and looked down at a sharp and unexpected pain in his leg. A black cat was prodding him with a single, extended claw. As he swung his wand down towards it with an exclamation of annoyance, the witch glided across the room and laid her hand upon the handle of the door to the Minister's office. Percy pushed the cat aside and smirked in anticipation, but the wards did not react to her presence. She ought to have been thrown backwards, yet the door creaked open and Percy heard the Minister's deep and reassuring voice.

"My dear? I assume that there is a major emergency?"

"It appears so," said the witch. "Timon informs me that our three friends are in trouble."

There was a moment of silence, and then Kingsley sighed.

"Weasley, send for Potter and your brother, would you? Sooner rather than later. Cissa, you might wish to Floo Andromeda and Draco."

"On my way, I shall call in at Grimmauld Place. We could do with a few more elves around here." Narcissa Malfoy drew her furs more closely around her neck.

"Free elves, my dear?"

"Yes, Kingsley, free elves. One never knows what elves will get up to if left to their own devices."

The Minister's lips curved into a slow smile that made Percy's instinct for danger go into gibbering overdrive.

"The odd familiar may not come amiss either." Kingsley glanced away from the witch and barked, "Weasley! Jump to it!"

Percy jumped.

"*Crucio!*" Rodolphus giggled and jumped up and down on the spot, pointing his wand down at his former brother-in-law. "Look at him wriggle! You don't like that, do you, Lucius? You don't like it when someone else has all the power!"

One of Malfoy's eyes was swollen shut, and his mouth and chin were crusted with blood from where he had bitten through his lip. Nevertheless, he took in a great breath, and when his convulsions eased for a moment, he shouted, "Waspish! Portly!" at the top of his voice.

"No, no," Bellatrix crooned, "silly Lucy! My boys put up nice, thick wards that can even keep out your house elves! You taught me to do that, don't you remember? We discovered how to do it after your elf helped Potter and his friends escape from the Manor. That time we spent recasting the wards on the Manor, oh happy days, when we were all one joyful family and all loved one another like families should." She pouted. "Such a shame we didn't catch little baby Draco in our net, isn't it? Such a sweet, soft, sensitive boy, my little nephew."

"He's worth ten of you, you idiotic dead cow!"

"*Crucio!*" Rodolphus screamed and Lucius howled. Hermione whimpered and struggled against the magical bonds that tightened painfully around her wrists and ankles. Snape sat against the wall, his eyes as flat and dark as the windows of an empty house.

"Let him have a rest," Rabastan growled. "He'll go mad and we don't want that. We want them sane!"

"Yes, sane," Bellatrix repeated softly, "so that they can know, and feel, and hear, and understand. That's right. Oh, if only my Lord was still here, how he would enjoy making them pay! What about the girlie? What shall we do with her, my boys? Who wants her first?"

Three pairs of eyes two narrowed in anticipation and one rendered in dingy paint turned towards Hermione. Snape spoke for the first time.

"What do you want from us?"

"To hear you scream," Rabastan said hoarsely.

"Yes, but apart from that." Snape's tone was dismissive, as if torture was of no matter to him at all. "Is this to get at Potter, or the Ministry, or the Malfoys? What do you want to happen after we're dead or insane?"

Rodolphus shifted uncomfortably and wiped his palms down the side of his robes, but Bellatrix suddenly yelled from her portrait.

"Don't listen to him! He's a traitor; he was always a betrayer, the filthy scum!"

"No-one will give a damn what happens to me or Lucius, but you made a terrible mistake in taking Hermione," Snape continued, unperturbed. "Don't you know how powerful Potter is?"

"You don't frighten us, Snape."

"No, Rodolphus, I doubt if I do, but you should be very, very afraid of Potter. He isn't renowned for his... self-restraint. He's going to be angry, and angry Gryffindors aren't bothered about rules like the humane treatment of prisoners, for example."

"Oh shut up, you poncy bastard!"

Snape curled up as the brothers set about him with fists and boots, only ceasing when Bellatrix called them off.

"Always so full of yourself, Mister fucking clever teacher, always using big clever words and looking down your bloody nose at us," Rabastan panted, rubbing his bruised knuckles. "Well, try looking down it now!"

Hermione had heard Snape's nose crunch under Rabastan's fist. He was breathing through his mouth as blood poured down his face.

"Leave them now, and go eat and sleep," Bellatrix said. "I'll watch over them and call you if I need you. Let them stew, let their imaginations work, let them *anticipate*. We can make this last for weeks if we're careful."

"Oh yeah." Rodolphus rubbed his crotch as he stared at Hermione. "You know, Bella, you're a lot more fun now that you're dead."

Harry halted in the doorway of the Minister's office, so abruptly that Ron bumped into his back.

"Potter, Weasley, come in and sit down," Kingsley said, in an unusually crisp voice. Ron and Harry did not express their surprise, but it must have been visible on their faces.

Narcissa, Draco and Astoria Malfoy, Andromeda Tonks and a black cat sat with the Minister around the small conference table at the far end of the office. The cat perched on a chair, staring at Astoria, who had her hands wrapped around a crystal ball. In the middle of the room, a cluster of familiar-looking, oddly dressed elves stood with apprehensive expressions.

"What's happened?" Ron asked.

Harry got to the heart of the matter. "Where's Hermione?"

"That is what we're here to investigate," Kingsley said as they took the two seats next to Andromeda. She nodded a greeting. "Cissa, would you please call the elf?"

Narcissa stared into midair, a slight frown creasing her pale forehead.

"Waspish!" she said sharply and a Malfoy elf popped into view. He was folding and unfolding the edge of his starched pillowcase in agitation.

"Waspish," Kingsley commanded, "tell the Aurors what you told us earlier, about your Master and his friends."

"Master was doing the hanky-panky..."

"Yes," Narcissa interrupted, "we established that, go to the part about the Crup."

"Hanky-panky with Hermione?" Ron demanded, his face going pink, but Harry elbowed him and he subsided.

"Master was in the parlour having tea with Master Professor Snape..." Ron and Harry both sat up a little straighter and exchanged a glance, "and Miss Hermione. Madam Derwent brought her Knickers..."

"What?" Ron exclaimed.

"Madam Derwent brought her Knickers to play hanky-panky with Master Lucius's Magic Wand."

"Crups," Narcissa explained laconically. "Di Derwent finds it amusing to call her Crups by the most appallingly risqué names. Wiltshire's Magic Wand is Lucius' top stud dog. Continue."

"Madam Derwent took her Crupses home. Madam Derwent left the new Crup in the kennels. Master called Portly to fetch the new Crup. Then Master, Master Professor and Miss all went."

"Went?" Harry asked. He got up and approached the elf, dropping down into a crouch. "Waspish, how did they go?"

Waspish's fingers sped up as he pleated the hem of his pillowcase.

"I is waiting in case they wants more tea," he explained, his voice rising in agitation. "I isn't spying on Master, I is waiting for Master Lucius's commands!"

"I'm sure you were, because you're a good elf. Did they Apparate?"

The elf shook his head, making his ears flap. "They is taking a Portkey."

"Ah." Harry stood up again. The cat mewed urgently and Narcissa reached to stroke its head.

"Timon has been keeping an eye upon Lucius and his associates for me," she said. "Timon was... concerned, and that was sufficient to send me to Kingsley."

One of the elves in the huddle made a sudden, abrupt movement and then stilled again. Harry's green eyes narrowed.

"Winky?"

"Miss Marple," Ron corrected him.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, "Miss Marple, of course."

"You is apologizing to elves?" she squeaked in surprise.

"Of course I am."

The little elf pattered forward, gazing up at him.

"We is detecting elves," she said. "We is detecting Crups for Miss Hermione. We is watching a funny Crup like she says."

"Mrs. Malfoy, can you call the elf Portly?" Harry asked. She raised her eyebrows but spoke the elf's name. He arrived almost immediately.

"Mistress Narcissa? Is you calling Portly?"

She waved at Harry. "Answer this Auror's questions."

"Did you bring a strange Crup from the kennels, just before your Master disappeared?" The elf nodded. "What did it look like?"

Portly indicated the size of an average Crup with his hands.

Miss Marple clicked her tongue. "What is Crup's colour?"

"You is a wicked free elf!" Portly gasped, folding his arms. "I is not speaking to evil elves!"

"Please answer the question," Harry said, and Portly pouted, glanced at Narcissa, gulped and said quickly, "Crup is grey and stripey. I never sees funny coloured Crup before."

"I is seeing grey and stripey Crup!" The elf in the deerstalker squealed, bouncing on the spot. "I is watching stripey Crup in Western Piercy!"

The cat yowled and made a scratching gesture in the air.

"A Crup and a Portkey... perhaps the Crup was a Portkey," Harry mused.

"Or an Animagus," Ron said darkly.

"Why hasn't Lucius called for an elf, if he's in trouble? That's what I did." Harry stuck his hands in his pockets and paced to the window.

"Perhaps he can't," Astoria said. Her voice was light and sweet, slightly girlish. "I can't seem to see him in the glass anymore; he may be behind very powerful magical shields or unconscious."

"Or dead," Draco whispered and she grasped his hand.

"Severus could call an elf," Narcissa remarked. "The Hogwarts elves will still obey him, if he thinks to call for them. He is still nominally the Headmaster. I do not believe that he has ever resigned the position."

"We would go to Miss Hermione, only because we like her," Miss Marple said, earning dark looks from the two Malfoy elves, "but we isn't finding her."

"Out of the country?" Ron asked thoughtfully.

"More likely behind elf-proof wards," Draco said. His mother shifted uneasily while everyone else stared at him.

"I didn't know there was such a thing," Harry said.

"We developed them after you escaped from the Manor."

"Who else knows?"

"Some of the Death Eaters. Aunt Bella certainly did and she'd have told Uncle Roddy."

"There are three options," Harry said, pacing again. "They're already dead, they're unconscious, or they're behind elf-proof wards. They could be anywhere."

"Wrong, babe," proclaimed an elf, holding up a red lollipop. Everyone stared at him, the Malfoys with expressions of outrage.

"Why's that, Kojak?" asked Ron.

"If they're unconscious, we're finding them." He waved his lollipop at the Malfoy elves. "They're bound elves, if their master is dead, they know." He stuck out his little chest. "We are the detecting elves, first class. The Masters and Miss Hermione are behind wards and we are finding the places where elves can't go!"

"That means searching the entire country!" Ron exclaimed.

"We are asking the Hogwarts elves to help find the Headmaster."

"Bloody hell," Ron said, "he's got a point. I'll Floo Minerva and get official permission to borrow the school elves, shall I?"

Kingsley nodded.

"Narcissa, the Manor elves will still obey you, so can you tell them all to join in?"

Narcissa rose gracefully to her feet.

"This is all most likely a storm in a teacup," she sighed. "Lucius may have taken his paramours for a day at the races at the Hippodrome de Longchamp."

"No!" Ron said loudly, and when she stared at him, he flushed but stood his ground. "Hermione wouldn't."

"Really, Mr. Weasley? Are you certain about that?"

"Oh, yeah. She'd never have gone away without leaving instructions for her elves."

"We are not her elves!" Miss Marple squeaked indignantly, "we are free elves! But we like Miss Hermione and we are worried. We are searching now!"

With a series of pops like the crackling of pine logs on a fire, the detective elves disappeared straight through the Ministry's wards.

Harry looked from the Minister to Narcissa, nodded to himself and touched Ron's shoulder, and led the way out of the office.

They huddled together, Hermione's shoulder pressed against Malfoy's, while they supported Snape on their laps. They all had their hands magically tied behind their backs and their ankles bound together. Snape's breathing was laboured and painful, and Hermione suspected that he had broken ribs.

"Are you any good at wandless magic?" Malfoy asked in her ear, his voice pitched low so as not to wake the snoring portrait of Bellatrix.

She shook her head. "Severus is better at it than I am."

"Magic obviously works inside their wards, so there isn't a magic-dampening field, and we are three against two."

"Might it be better to try to get a message out?"

Snape rumbled something and Hermione shifted so that her shoulder eased beneath his, assisting him to sit up.

"I'll try a Patronus," he whispered. His nose was badly swollen and his face blotched with dry blood. Although he managed to produce a faint, diffuse silver mist, it dissipated within seconds, leaving him trembling from exertion.

"Enough," Malfoy murmured, "don't exhaust yourself. You've already borne the brunt of it; you must stop making them angry."

Snape's smile was a terrible grimace behind the blood.

"It worked, didn't it? They barely touched Hermione."

"You don't have to be noble on my behalf," she said. Even in the gloom, his dark eyes fixed unnervingly on her face.

"I failed to save her," he whispered, and the words cut into her heart like icy knives, "but I'm damned if I'll fail to save you, no matter what it takes."

"Hush," Malfoy warned, as Bellatrix stirred in her portrait and muttered, "Mudbloods and traitors, Crucio the lot of them, boys."

Hermione nuzzled against the side of Snape's blood-caked hair and kissed his temple.

"We'll get through this, Severus; we'll get out, all of us."

"Gryffindor optimism," Malfoy said.

Bellatrix opened her painted eyes and called sweetly, "Boys? Are you up and ready for fun? Our new pets are rested and waiting for you!"

"All right, all right, we're coming, woman, hold your thestrals."

"Bring a bucket of water; we don't want them to die of thirst, now, do we? They're no fun when they stop squealing."

"Yeah, Circe's tits, we're on it. Got some old bread here somewhere, too."

Rabastan shoved open the door and shambled in, levitating a dented metal bucket. His brother followed and tossed a handful of stale crusts into Hermione's lap.

"Good lads," Bellatrix crooned, "now take me with you while you have breakfast and I'll tell you what to do next. Itty bitty pets are going to have such a nice surprise! Ickle Lucy is such a good boy when he's under *Imperio*, isn't he?"

Rodolphus's shoulders shook as he chuckled.

"Oh yeah, good one, Bella! We could take pictures of him inside her."

"See, you do have clever ideas, too! Send them to Potter, show him his goodie-goodie ickle friend is really a nasty little Gryffindor slut!"

"Let's make 'em both do her at the same time," Rabastan said as they levitated the portrait carefully down from the wall and carried it out.

"Tasty," his brother commented and then the door slammed shut.

Hermione tried very hard to still her trembling but Snape must have felt it. He rested his chin lightly on top of her head.

"Shh, they're only trying to frighten us. I'll get them angry enough to forget about her stupid plans; we just need to hold out until someone finds us."

"My turn, I think," Malfoy said, with a faux-bored yawn. "Might as well. If they knock me senseless, the time will pass more quickly."

"You don't have to try to be brave to impress me, either of you."

"We're not," Malfoy said. "We're both far more injured to the *Cruciatus* curse than you are."

"I'm still working on wandless magic," Snape muttered.

They were silent for a few minutes, and then Hermione asked, "Can you hear anything?"

Malfoy cocked his head. "Not a thing. Why, did you hear something?"

"No. No vehicles, no birds, no voices, nothing. I wonder where we are."

"We could be anywhere," Snape said peevishly, "because we're behind massive wards. Try casting a simple spell, you'll feel them. We're inside layers of anti-Muggle, anti-house-elf, anti-wizard, anti-Apparation and anti-everything else spells. The Lestranges have been building their defenses for a long time. I'm trying to feel my way around them but it isn't easy without a wand."

Malfoy muttered, "*Lumos*," and a faint glow of light issued from his hands, still fixed behind his back, then faded out.

"The echoes feel vaguely familiar; they based them on the wards Bella knew about, at the Manor."

"Naturally."

"It would take our full attention, our wands and a few days to break them."

"Rabastan is a Crup," Hermione said to herself, "and I told Sherlock to watch out for the brindle Crup..."

"No house-elf could penetrate these wards, my dear."

"Thank you, Lucius, for making us feel so much better." Snape shifted and caught his breath as if in pain, before settling back against Hermione again.

"We need to hold on," Hermione said strongly, "because I just know that Harry and Ron are searching for us."

"Which makes me so happy," Malfoy sighed.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 6

Some elves get hooked on watching reruns of the great detectives, an investigation into the dodgy breeding of pedigree Crups leads Hermione and Severus into Lucius Malfoy's bed via the bath, Severus goes back to Hogwarts to retrieve his wand, Delilah Derwent, bastion of pure-blood aristocracy, arrives with her Knickers under one arm to play hanky-panky with Malfoy's Magic Wand, a Crup goes bad and some left-over Death Eaters get their comeuppance. Oh, and of course, Severus gets his just desserts.

"Severus," Hermione said gently, "Are you awake?"

The brothers had taken the portrait out to talk to Bellatrix while they ate dinner. Hermione could smell food, possibly fish and chips, and she was so empty that the odour made her nauseous.

Snape moaned faintly, and she felt his head shift on her thigh.

"Yes, unfortunately."

"Can you change into your Animagus form?"

"I do not have an Animagus form."

"Oh." She frowned. "I thought you were the black cat. It has such unusually dark eyes; I was convinced it was you. It's been hanging around Grimmauld Place for weeks."

Malfoy gave a hoarse gasp of laughter. "Yes, my friends, we do have to hold on, indeed."

Hermione fell into a dreamlike state in which she floated, light as a feather levitated in a Charms class, above a landscape made up of bits and pieces of her memories. There was Hogwarts basking in a shaft of sunlight; here was the Burrow, complete with chickens and Molly hanging out the washing, and below her, the grimy London square where house-elves slipped unseen through the scurrying Muggles as they came and went around the detective agency.

She could feel hands on her thighs, their touch hard and indifferent, and told herself that this was not Lucius, it was simply his body, borrowed for another's purpose. The Lestranges were determined to make her react for their damned camera. They wanted pictures to send to *The Prophet* and to Harry and Ron and anyone else who loved her, showing her writhing in obscene pleasure while Malfoy and Snape used her, but the brothers were unable to hold the *Imperius* curse upon all three of them at once. As soon as they cast at Snape and Malfoy, Hermione would slip away into passivity; once they recast upon her, either Snape would shrug off the curse to sting them with wandless hexes or Malfoy twisted out of view of the camera.

"Curse them! *Crucio* them all!" Bellatrix screamed from far above, but Hermione was watching Ron and Harry, zooming across a murky landscape on their brooms.

Her visions grew darker as rain swept across the castle, and it disappeared. The Burrow was overwhelmed by black clouds, and she searched for her friends, fearing for their lives as thunder roared overhead.

"Harry?" she called, and there he was, clad in his Auror's robes, flying the newest top-of-the-range Thunderbolt with Ron close behind on his own racing broom. She saw the sky split open by lightning, and then realized that the fire had come from Harry's wand, and his face was fixed in an expression of fury as he bore down upon her enemies. "Harry!" she shouted and jerked back to full consciousness.

The thunder pealed out again, rattling the dilapidated old house and sending dust sifting down from the ceiling. As the Lestranges stared around in alarm, Snape thrashed and succeeded in hooking a foot behind Rabastan's knee, bringing him crashing to the floor. Malfoy immediately took advantage of their inattention, lunging for Rodolphus's wand and grappling with him.

"Idiots!" Bellatrix shrieked, "You let them distract you! It's only a storm! Bind them again, bind them!"

Rabastan turned his wand onto Snape and screamed "*Incarcerous!*" but Hermione flung herself on top of him, grasping the wand by its shaft. It felt greasy and her fingers slithered, but she was able to keep it aimed away from Snape for long enough. Snape seized the bucket and brought it down onto Rabastan's head, water sloshing everywhere.

Malfoy and Rodolphus rolled and grunted, neither accustomed to Muggle hand-to-hand fighting, limbs flailing so wildly that Hermione could do nothing to help. Snape fell to his knees, a hand pressed to his side and his teeth gritted against the pain of his broken ribs. Rabastan slowly pushed himself up to his feet, and Hermione pointed his slimy wand at him.

"Don't move!" she cried, and he leered through his dripping hair.

"Oh, yeah? What you going to do, little girlie? You going to curse me?"

"Watch me!"

"Just do it," Snape groaned. "Oh god..." He toppled and Rabastan lunged at Hermione.

Such was her mistrust of the wand that Hermione did not even try to use it to cast a spell. Rabastan, a pure-blood wizard, misread her intentions as she raised the wand high but failed to summon her magic. Perhaps he was not sufficiently skilled at wandless magic to Summon the wand from her grasp, or maybe his contempt for her made him forget for a moment that this was the witch who had stood with Harry Potter against Voldemort. He took two lumbering steps, arms spread wide, intent upon knocking her to the ground and reclaiming his wand, and she thrust the tip into his eye. His own momentum carried him forward. The wand splintered with a burst of sick, green light, and Rabastan gave a shriek of agony.

"*Crucio!*" Bellatrix screamed. "*Crucio* them!" Hermione was trapped beneath Rabastan, who jerked convulsively and continued to emit a high, wordless sound like an animal in unendurable pain. Snape was unconscious or dead. Malfoy's struggles were weakening against the heavier Rodolphus, who appeared to be regaining control of his wand.

Something small and black darted across the periphery of Hermione's vision. It launched itself into the air, landed on Rodolphus's head and attempted to remove his eyeballs from their sockets with two clawed, furry, little paws. His scream rivaled that of his brother. Malfoy drew back his fist and punched him square across the jaw. Rodolphus flopped backwards, unconscious. The cat skipped out of the way, sat down and began grooming its front feet.

Thunder crashed and abruptly fell silent, a silence that rang in Hermione's ears. Rabastan had stopped moving and something horribly warm was splashing across her face and neck.

"About time, too," Malfoy grumbled as he sat up and rubbed his knuckles. The cat ignored him.

"Hermione?"

The voice seemed distant, something out of her past, but then hands were tipping the limp, heavy body from her, lifting her up and cradling her against a strong chest. "Hermione? Say something!"

Harry sounded frantic, brushing at the blood that covered her face.

"I'm okay," she said, "it's his blood. I'm all right. Please, see to Severus, he's badly hurt."

"I is seeing to the Headmaster," declared a high, little voice, "I is taking the Headmaster sir to St Mungo's."

"You!" screamed Bellatrix from her portrait, "Murderer! Regicide, slayer of everything noble and beautiful "

Harry turned his wand upon her, narrowed his eyes and said in a flat, hard voice, "I've never used this curse, but they can't do me for casting it on a portrait, can they? *Avada Kadavra!*"

Green light splashed across the painting and faded, leaving her inert, nothing but blotches of paint upon the canvas, her mouth forever open in a soundless howl.

The elves clustered around Hermione's desk, speaking over one another in their high, shrill voices like a flock of starlings.

"I speaks to all the elves, I asks them to look for the grey stripey Crup."

"Barny sees the Crup in Norfolk, Barny tells Sherlock."

"We all goes to Norfolk."

"We looks for the place where magic isn't."

"A dead place where we can't go."

"Where the Crup is."

"Then we tells Harry Potter," Miss Marple said with satisfaction, "because Harry Potter is a good wizard and Harry Potter goes to find Miss Hermione."

"And he brings Mistress Narcissa and Master Draco "

"They isn't your Master and Mistress, foolish elf!"

"They says the wards is like the wards was on the Manor, so they knows how to blow them up."

"Harry Potter blows them up. Harry Potter is so angry, Harry Potter blows up everything to reach Miss Hermione!"

"Merlin, are they always like this?" a slightly hoarse voice complained from the armchair by the fire.

"That's why I keep a firm hand on my lot, Severus, they're worse than the Crups. You'll have to maintain discipline on the Hogwarts elves give them an inch and they'll take a mile."

"We is detecting elves," Miss Marple said proudly. "We is free and we is scary and we is on the side of law and order and we isn't like other elves."

"Obviously not," Snape said. His lovely voice was still rough from screaming under the *Cruciatus* curse, but his ribs and broken nose had been healed and he looked back to normal apart from the residual bruises. "You might bring me another Firewhisky, though, and a top-up for Lucius."

"We isn't subservient," the elf in the fedora informed him. "We is only fetching you the drinks because you is Miss Hermione's bits on the side."

Nine Years Later

"To Professor Severus Snape, Headmaster of Hogwarts, for playing a vital and courageous part in the downfall of Voldemort, and for his role in the capture of the Lestrangle brothers, I am proud to present the Order of Merlin, First Class."

Amid loud applause, the new Minister for Magic pinned the medal to the front of Snape's black robe. Snape had resisted the combined efforts of his own wife, Kingsley and Narcissa Shacklebolt and Lucius and Draco Malfoy to convince him to accept his due reward, but Hermione suspected that if Harry had asked him 'for my Mum's sake' once more, Snape would have been forced to hex him. Hexing the Man Who Lived to be Minister would not have done much for Snape's academic career, and after all, he now had a family to support.

A much-loved part of that family was fidgeting slightly on Hermione's lap.

"Uncle Lucius?" Rose Eileen Snape whispered to their nearest neighbour. Lucius glanced down at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Yes, your highness?" Having never had a daughter or grand-daughter of his own to spoil, Lucius was determined to indulge his god-daughter's every whim. He drove Hermione up the wall.

"Who's that funny witch with the Crup on her head?" She pointed across the room.

Delilah Derwent waved, and the Crup wobbled unsteadily on the rim of her hat.

"Panties," Madam Derwent said in what she fondly believed to be a whisper. "ThreeWitches Peephole Panties, naughty little thing, go well with your new Muggle stud dog, bring her over for the business next month!"

"What's 'peephole panties', Uncle Lucius?"

"I'll explain later, sweetheart. It's a secret."

"Oh." Rose nodded. "The elves tell me those sometimes, too. Did you know there's a baby inside Mummy's tummy? That's a secret. And Daddy tells me secrets, I know lots of them."

His grey eyes glittered evilly as he leaned down.

"Really? Do tell your favourite Uncle all about it."

Rose was on a roll, and Hermione knew that there was no stopping her now.

"Daddy says that Uncle Ron is a dunderhead and Auntie Luna is mad 'cos she puts up with him. They're going to buy the detective agency from Mum. Dad says you have to be crazy to work with elves. And," here she took a deep breath and Hermione crossed her fingers, "Daddy and Mummy both think you've got a sexy bottom even though you are getting old! Daddy says you can still kiss as well as ever, too."

Hermione tried to wordlessly spell herself invisible. Molly Weasley tutted somewhere behind her, and Ginny Potter gave a positively crone-like cackle.

"What's the joke?" Harry asked, striding down from the podium with a glass of champagne in each hand and handing one to his chortling wife.

"I am not getting old," Lucius Malfoy declared, Summoning a glass. "I am a wizard in the prime of life, thank you very much, young lady."

"I say, Snape!" Delilah Derwent seized the Headmaster by the arm, ignoring his affronted expression. "Is that right? You and Hermione and Malfoy? What-ho! Been part of a threesome for the last seventy years, never regretted a day of it. Three witches in naughty underwear, can't beat it, prime stuff. Malfoy, I'll owl you about Panties when she comes into season. Good man!"

She strode away, the Crup bouncing around on her hat and barking happily.

"Mummy," Rose said, scrambling down from Hermione's knee, "what's a threesome? Can I have one?"

Malfoy tousled her bushy black hair.

"If you're very good, when you're grown up, you may be lucky enough to find your own." He raised his champagne. "To the Headmaster of Hogwarts!"

"If you insist," Snape sighed.

"And to the Minister for Magic," Hermione said, brandishing her glass of pumpkin juice.

"All's well," Harry said happily, and so it was... apart from the very unwell heap of butterbeer-sodden house-elves currently passed out beneath the table, but then drink has all too frequently been the downfall of the private eye.