

Danse Macabre, or: Learning to Light a Fire

by karelia

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: I still don't own the characters nor the names of the chicken breeds, let alone the land where the story takes place.

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"I don't even have any poison," Lucius said, holding on to Narcissa for dear life.

"Lucius, please!" Narcissa looked at him, horrified. "Stop right here! It is *not* the end of the world!"

"It may as well be," he muttered, loosening his grip on her. "How the hell are we going to survive without magic?"

"Listen! We won't know until we *try*!"

Lucius turned away abruptly. "And die trying. Or freeze in the process." He lit a match in yet another attempt to light the fire in the hearth. But it was to no avail. Even the paper remained unlit, and the match joined the large pile of failed attempts, leaving almost no trace, just as its many predecessors.

"Come, let's go to sleep. It's late, and at least we'll be warm in bed." Narcissa held out her hand, and after several moments' hesitation, he took it and allowed her to lead him upstairs to the bedroom, knowing his sleep would be filled with nightmares of magic-less days, weeks, months to come, if their first day in this thrice-damned cottage in the middle of nowhere was anything to go by.

"P- Professor?!" Hermione held on to the door frame, trying not to faint.

"Still stating the obvious, I see, Miss Granger." He regarded her from head to toe. "Believe me, I would have preferred to remain dead to the world were it not for... friends who need help." His sneer and careful choice of wording left her with no doubt it *was* Snape.

Recovering quickly, Hermione took a deep breath. "I don't know where I come in...in this scenario...but you may as well tell me in more comfortable surroundings." She

stepped back to let him into her small flat and waved in the direction of the living room. "Would you like some tea or coffee?"

He turned to face her. "A coffee would be acceptable. As long as it isn't that vile freeze-dried instant calamity. Black, please."

She was unable to hide her smile. "I have no such *calamities* in my cupboards. I trust a Costa Rican medium roast will be acceptable?" Upon his nod, waving towards the sofa, she said, "Why don't you make yourself comfortable in the living room, and I'll get the brew ready?"

A few minutes later Hermione appeared in the living room with two steaming mugs of coffee, a plate of biscuits levitating at eye level in front of her. "Right. To what do I owe the pleasure?" She placed one mug in front of him and landed the plate in the middle of the small coffee table before sitting down in the chair opposite with her mug.

Snape took a long sip of coffee. He looked quite at ease on her sofa in the kind of surroundings Hermione had worked hard to achieve: a combination both beauty and understatement, combined in an atmosphere of comfortable cosiness that created a perfect balance of masculine and feminine. "I take it you are aware of the Wizengamot's decision regarding the Malfoys? That is, Draco's parents," he added. "Thankfully, they took Draco's age into consideration. That, together with the assumption that he was Imperioed by his own father ensured he escaped any punishment. Ludicrous." He shook his head.

Hermione's face dropped. "Yes, of course I know about it. The Wizengamot did not budge, not even after Harry's attempts to intervene. One would think our government is no more interested in acts promoting humanity than the Muggle government." The pain in his eyes forced her to look elsewhere. "If there is anything I can do... though I have no idea what or how..."

"Miss Granger, I am first of all relieved that you are not amongst those who think it was a fair verdict." He paused, then demanded, "Look at me!"

Hermione started, surprised at his sudden return to the trademark teacher's voice, and obeyed. "I was there, at Hogwarts, the night Voldemort died." She couldn't help but notice the lack of flinching upon hearing his former master's name. "I've also heard Harry tell the story of Mrs Malfoy saving his life at least several hundred times by now."

He nodded. "There is hope you use your brain for things other than reciting book texts after all." The shadow of a smirk played around his lips, wiping her frown off instantly. Stranger things had happened than Snape displaying a sign of humour, though she didn't remember any.

Another sip of coffee, this time accompanied by an approving nod, followed by nibbling on a biscuit, and then he continued. "You could help. If you are so inclined."

Hermione regarded him and, after taking a sip of coffee herself, said, "Of course. As long as you don't ask me to do anything unlawful or beyond my abilities, I'll be happy to help in any way I can."

"Only nothing unlawful?" He raised an eyebrow. "I trust that illegalities won't be an issue, then?"

"It depends. I would have to decide such on an individual case. All I can say with confidence is that I won't harm anyone and would need a very good reason to disturb someone's peace. Or lie. And lest you wonder, I have no source for procuring marijuana either."

"May I remind you that I am a Potions master?" He sighed. "Gryffindors. Though at least you've grown up. I never thought I would see the day."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "It's what happens if you're involved in an all-out war during your teenage years."

"Tell me all about it." He went silent for a few moments. "I shan't ask you for an oath; however, I do ask you to keep our conversation confidential."

Hermione nodded. "Naturally. Despite six years of sharing a room with Lavender, I never did learn the art of gossiping."

Now his smirk was a full one. "Thank Merlin for small mercies." Then, Snape turned serious again. "The Malfoys need a sort of go-between in order to avoid losing their magic completely. I have no intention of insulting you by reciting any knowledge you may already have, but it is generally not well known that wizards lose their magic entirely if they do not practice at least once in a while, which of course is next to impossible without a wand..."

"... And even lose their sanity," Hermione completed. "I've read about a few cases and was quite shocked to tell the truth that the Wizengamot would cast such a judgement in this day and age, even more so given Harry's vociferous defence of the Malfoys."

"Indeed. It makes them no better than the Dark Lord in my book. It is one of the most barbaric things one can inflict, and I don't want to even begin to think how Lucius is already suffering. Narcissa seems to be taking it somewhat better."

"So, what can I do?" Hermione asked. She *wanted* to be proactive. The verdict on the Malfoys' case had come as a shock in a world recovering from years of pettiness and injustice and, worse, cruelty, though enough...too many...wizards and witches had rejoiced at the news. Apparently, fairness had long left the planet...or at least the wizarding world.

Snape's eyes met hers again. "The Ministry is aware that I'm alive. They are also aware that the Malfoys are my friends...my oldest friends. It doesn't take much paranoia to assume they'll watch me. Whilst I'm allowed to visit my friends whenever I wish, I cannot afford to be caught letting either of them use my wand. So my best bet is to help them to integrate in the Muggle world." His eyes had taken on a piercing look.

"And you need help with that." It was not a question. When he looked as if about to explode, she added quickly, "Look, I know what it's like to lose ties with the Muggle world. The main reason I moved into this neighbourhood...aside from needing to be away from the Weasleys...was to maintain a connection with it. Being Muggle-born, I've never been entirely at home in the wizarding or the Muggle world, so I can well imagine that someone who grew up with one foot in either culture would eventually choose the wizarding world entirely. If you have any idea how I can help you with the Malfoys settling in the Muggle world, I'll do what I can."

To her surprise, Snape looked defeated, not a trait she'd thought he was familiar with. "They know nothing about the Muggle world, Miss Granger. *Nothing*. Until a couple of weeks ago, Narcissa had no idea how to make tea or coffee. Lucius has been attempting to light a fire all day long and has nothing to show aside from a growing number of empty match boxes. Neither can cook. They didn't even know how to use a bloody phone to order a delivery from a restaurant. Simple, everyday things you and I grew up with and never even thought about are entirely alien to them, and there's nobody there to guide them along. And of course, the Malfoys are far too proud to ask for any help. It took me an hour to convince them to move into the cottage I own so they wouldn't end up homeless on the street."

Hermione took a deep breath. Her heart went out to the Malfoys...had when she'd learned about the verdict...but it was beyond her to imagine just how much they were struggling. "Oh, gods, I had no idea..." She was lost for words.

Snape nodded. "I see you get the picture."

Hermione took a deep breath. "I suppose a crash course in Muggle life would be out of the question, considering whom we're talking about."

Snape snorted. "You could say that. Narcissa is slightly more practical in that regard. At least she didn't threaten me with death when I attempted to explain the purpose of a phone. Lucius on the other hand... Let's not speak of that."

"And how exactly do you think I'll be of any use, given their... appreciation for Muggle-borns?"

Lucius's eyes widened as he watched the flames growing, licking the logs in the fireplace and taking on an increasingly red glow. "Cissy! I did it! Finally!" He was certain he'd felt accomplished before, but this seemed to be of far greater proportion than anything he'd ever achieved.

Narcissa joined him in front of the fire, her mouth forming an O as she regarded the flames. "I never doubted you would figure it out. I suppose everything is a matter of

practice, not that different from our world..." She leaned against him, and he put his arm around her.

"You're right, of course. It's just very frustrating to start a new life at our age. Too much to learn for my taste."

"Yes. I don't exactly enjoy struggling with tasks the house-elves did for us all our lives..."

"Of course not. But you're doing much better than I." He said it with the usual admiration in his voice, Lucius was certain, though he couldn't help the slight resentment towards her. Everything Narcissa did seemed to come so much easier to her than what he did. Even the pasta dish she'd concocted for dinner tonight had been a pleasant experience. Take-aways were convenient, but satisfaction was not to be found in such impersonally prepared food.

Then, Narcissa had mastered the art of using a washing machine at the first attempt, and his clothes carried the scent of fresh air. He put his resentment aside. "Come. Let's go to bed." The timeless diversion of making love would help put his mind to rest for a few hours, too.

Narcissa looked scared when Lucius entered the kitchen. She put a cup of tea on the table. "I need to go shopping. We're out of bread and eggs and just about everything else." She clung to him. "Merlin, Lucius, I've never been shopping at a Muggle place, let alone for food! How am I going to do this?"

Squelching an unknown panic, Lucius sipped his tea before answering. "Why, it can't be that hard...you enter the shop, choose what you wish to buy, pay for it, and walk out. At least that's how Severus explained it. No different than going into Flourish and Blotts except you pay with those debt notes instead of real money." He knew he should at least offer to accompany her, but any trace of courage within him had scurried to places unknown.

Narcissa swallowed hard. "Yes. I know *how* to do it. It's just... I've never done it. In a Muggle shop." She shook her head. "Never mind. I'll manage." Grabbing her shopping basket and throwing her purse into it, she fleetingly placed a kiss on his lips on her way out.

Lucius slumped in his seat. "Damn this life." It took every ounce of his energy to rise from his chair and rekindle the fire. Central heating was a fine invention...if it worked. Perhaps British Gas would lower themselves to investigate the problem, though Severus had warned him not to set his hopes too high. Life in the North was slow, much slower than in the South, and Muggle life in the North seemed even slower. The lack of magic added misery with a capital M.

To his surprise, getting the fire going was a piece of cake. Lucius was glad nobody could see his smug expression as he watched the flames dancing around the newly placed logs. "How the mighty have fallen," he muttered. *Once, I felt accomplished casting an Avada Kedavra; now lighting a damn fire the Muggle way has the same effect.* Somehow that satisfied him...a very different kind of satisfaction from casting an Unforgivable.

He returned to the kitchen to tackle the electric kettle. Another cup could not wait until Narcissa returned, and he might as well see if he could master this skill, too.

"Damn. No milk." He turned to search for a piece of parchment to send an owl to his wife, then stopped dead in his tracks. "WHY?" he howled.

Tea without milk tasted awful, and it took every ounce of his self-control to keep himself from throwing the mug against the nearest wall to enjoy the noise of it shattering into a thousand pieces. Instead, he poured the tea down the drain and placed the mug in the kitchen sink before slumping down in front of the fire.

Finally, Narcissa returned, carrying a full basket and several bags. "I'm back," she called as he rose to meet her near the door. "Phew, those bags are heavy."

"Did you have to buy the entire shop?" Lucius asked, ignoring her struggle.

"Oh, please, Lucius! At least help with the bags before you start complaining." Narcissa held out a couple of bags for him to take.

He did so grudgingly.

"Well, the shopping was a pleasant experience, thanks for asking." They had reached the kitchen now, and Lucius dropped the bags on the counter as if they were on fire.

Narcissa rolled her eyes. "Look, we might as well make the best of this rotten situation. No point moping over something we can't change!" She took the milk out of the basket and turned the kettle on.

"I made tea, but then we were out of milk, and black tea tastes vile," he said.

His wife laughed. "Why do you think I was so keen to get the shopping done?" By the time the water boiled, all the food was put away, two new mugs were ready, and Narcissa poured the boiling water over the tea bags.

"The people in the local shop are at least nice. No pretence, just ordinary country folks, I imagine. One lady even tried to convince me to join the local knitting and crochet group. She assured me I could learn either quite easily."

"But you won't!" Lucius was horrified. House-elves were there to do the knitting of pretty garments, not something his wife...a Malfoy!...would ever lower herself to do.

She smiled. "Not for now, but who knows... It's not as if we'll be able to buy house-elves, and as long as we don't have an income, we won't have the funds to employ staff for such ventures either. I know Severus has assured us that he has more money than is good for him, but living off him just doesn't seem right in the long run."

She started when he rose abruptly.

"I don't want to talk about it." Lucius returned to the fireplace, his now even gloomier mood perfectly matching the dark clouds looming over the horizon.

Hermione had been pondering the fate of the Malfoys for a good couple of days now, making plenty of use of the wisdom of her delightful Muggle neighbour, an elderly lady who had long been a widow, but nevertheless knew how to make most of a life that had handed her sour grapes. "If someone hands you lemons, make lemonade," was one of her favourite sayings, and Hermione found no reason to disagree.

"So, essentially this couple is like an old, displaced individual. They don't know anyone local, have no transport, no money to speak of, and they might as well have arrived here from the Gobi Desert, since they don't appear to be familiar with what you call "Muggle" lifestyle." The old lady looked at Hermione expectantly.

"Exactly," murmured Hermione, no longer so amazed how Evelyn always seemed to be spot-on with anything that occupied her thoughts or heart.

"But that's easy, love," Evelyn laughed, "because the cure for that kind of problem is the internet, is it not?"

Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "You are a genius." Then she sighed. "How can we get them to *learn* the use of a computer...?"

Evelyn chuckled. "I recommend a very good teacher, dear."

"Yes, well..." Blushing, Hermione laughed. "You were a willing student. I'm not so sure about the Malfoys."

"Take that hurdle when you get to it, love," Evelyn suggested.

Hermione sent an owl to Snape, asking to meet over coffee at her place.

An hour later, he knocked at her door.

"So, my neighbour," Hermione started as she placed a mug of steaming black coffee in front of him, "had the most brilliant idea. You've heard of the internet?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "Grant me some Muggle knowledge, Miss Granger. Of course *I know* the internet."

"Oh, good." Hermione ignored his affectation of superiority. "Then you'll agree that it will be the saviour for the Malfoys, no?"

His eyes widened. "Damn, girl. You have a point."

Hermione grinned. "Once they master its use, they can at the very least order food online. And perhaps they'll make friends, if not locally, then virtually. In any case, it should ease some of their problems. Plus, they'll get a genuine insight into the Muggle way of life."

"How...?" He trailed off.

"You suggest it to them. I assume your bank account has been as fat as mine since the war reparations, but if not, I'm happy to chip in."

"Miss Granger, are you well?" Snape enquired in a most unusually polite manner.

"Oh, come on. Neither of us will ever be able to blow that obscene amount of Galleons during a lifetime. The bloody goblins made me pay a fortune for setting that dragon free, but I still have enough left over to last several lifetimes. And if ever I have children, I plan on bringing them up with the attitude that working hard strengthens the character rather than letting them spend my fortune from the start."

Snape smirked. "And you are working hard how?"

"That's for *me* to know, but rest assured, I have a rather strict schedule and spend a full six hours a day working, which is considerably more productive than working eight hours a day in a typical employee environment. Whether my project will come to fruition is, at this stage, anyone's guess, but I can't say I don't feel accomplished at the end of a day. In any case, I *have* worked hard enough as well as taken plenty of risk to have this fortune bestowed on me. I could have died in the process."

"True enough." He looked rather sober now. "For what it's worth, I'm glad you didn't."

"Professor, are you all right?" Hermione wasn't sure she'd heard correctly.

Snape rolled his eyes at her. "Look, Granger, I know it's alien for any of my former students to assume I actually display human traits, but I would have thought you of all people might have the brains to at least consider the possibility."

Hermione laughed. "I've seen you display human traits before, just not in such a nice way." She nearly dissolved into giggles when he glared at her.

Days seemed to pass at snail's pace, yet suddenly a new month had arrived, and the weather finally remembered it had more to offer than endless drizzle. One morning after tea, Lucius decided to inspect the garden, a task that had not occurred to him since they'd moved here.

"Merlin, how I've missed the outdoors," he muttered as he strode across the lawn to inspect the trees marking the border between the property and the adjacent field. "All that's needed now is some peafowl..."

"Moo!"

Lucius arrived at the fence behind the trees and spotted a Jersey or perhaps Dexter cow...the beast wasn't big enough to be anything else. "Moo to you too." He slowly held out his hand, and to his surprise, the cow licked it. "My, Cissy will be delighted. She always preferred cows over peacocks," he said conversationally.

A louder moo nearby turned the cow's attention, and she wandered off towards the bull.

"Ah, yes. Mating time. I'll grant you privacy." Lucius slowly turned towards the house, inspecting a bush here, a perennial there on his way back. A spark of hope ignited within him when he realised the garden had plenty of potential. Certainly, nowhere near the size of Malfoy Manor, but he *could* make it the envy of the neighbourhood if he put his mind to it. From what he knew, Muggle gardening wasn't that different from gardening with magic. More physical work, but then he could probably do with some of that. What was it Muggles called it? Ah, yes... *Exercise*.

"Perhaps we should try to get to know the neighbours with the cows. I would much rather buy fresh milk than that devoid-of-nutrients, pasteurised, homogenised, standardised *swill* you find in Muggle shops," Narcissa said when he told her about his encounter. "I mean, honestly, it's worse than the idea of producing only blue-eyed and blond babies!"

Lucius chuckled. "I suppose going for a walk won't do any harm," he allowed. "That way, the locals get used to the sight of us."

"And walking is healthy," his wife returned, smiling.

Lucius huffed...his thoughts about exercise through gardening forgotten...and took up his usual place by the fire. Spring might be in the air, and the animals might know about its imminent arrival, but the temperature was still positively wintry. At least lighting the fire was no longer an issue. He ignored the voice of his father, thankfully now only in the back of his mind. *Practice makes perfect, son*.

Exploring the village and its surroundings per pedes slowly morphed from chore to pleasurable task. The Jersey-cow farmer turned out to be a lovely, down-to-earth lady, who never tired of explaining the ridiculous regulations imposed by a supposedly benevolent government and who was only too glad to barter fresh milk for potions of a healing or cosmetic nature that Narcissa easily produced in her kitchen with herbs found on their walks or in the garden. "See, I can't sell it, pet, but if I barter it, the commercial law don't apply," she said in her sing-song northern accent. "And there's nothing I love more than telling them government guys to get stuffed." Her cows' milk was fabulous, and her gratitude for potions humbling.

One day, Severus arrived with a package no larger than a coffee-table book. "It's called a computer and connects you to the world," he said in answer to the Malfoys' questioning looks. "Yes, I'll have a coffee, thank you."

Lucius and Narcissa stood on either side of Severus as he explained the workings of the laptop, only stopping to take a sip of coffee, until he abruptly stood and said, "You try!"

"No. No. I couldn't do that. Cissy, you go." Despite an eerie likeness to magic, the thing scared Lucius *Magic without magic!*

Narcissa sat down in front of the computer. It took her a while to navigate with that contraption Severus called *mouse*, but once she'd got the hang of that, her progress was instant.

"Oh, my, it's wonderful!" she exclaimed, coaxing a smile out of Lucius. "I wonder if a Yahoo search will give me ideas what to do with the twenty pints of fresh milk Pippa sent along this morning." She laughed and turned to Severus. "My neighbour thinks higher of the simple potions I manage than she does of Muggle doctors, so she repays

me in lots of really fresh milk, something you can't get from Muggle shops. And tea just tastes so much better now."

Severus smirked. "Cheese is a distinct possibility. After all, it's how the ancients preserved milk."

"Oh, please, Severus!" Narcissa seemed exasperated; Lucius noticed her suppressing a snort. "Cheese is a wonderful thing, sure, but unless one has the set up, it's impossible to make."

Severus shrugged. "No matter. If you want a real lesson on how to utilise the internet, I have a... friend, a Muggle-born, who's an expert at finding information. If it is on the *net*, she will find it."

"Oh!" Narcissa exclaimed. "I would love that!"

"Certainly. Let's invite a Mudblood."

Severus glared at his oldest friend. "Don't call her that. If a Jew offered to save a German's life, would the German turn him away, Lucius? The use of a computer may not be life saving, but it can certainly improve the quality of a magicless life."

Severus's words stung, but Lucius shrugged and forced himself to remain in the kitchen rather than escape to his place of solitude. *Sulking corner*, the helpful voice in his mind supplied. He had much to thank Severus for, considering he had neither frozen nor starved to death since being banished from the wizarding world, so swallowing his pride for a few minutes was a small price to pay.

"So, who is this... *friend* you speak of?" Narcissa enquired.

"Well," Severus said, "the term *friend* is perhaps an overstatement. Let's say she's been useful to me lately... Hermione Granger."

"Oh. Draco told us about Potter's efforts; I can't say I'm surprised. Yes, why not; if she is willing, do bring her along. Nothing wrong with learning new skills, even if they do come from a Mud... Muggle-born." Narcissa's smile wasn't quite genuine, though Lucius was almost certain Severus didn't notice or at least overlooked it.

"My apologies, Miss Granger. I sold you as *the* eminence of internet expertise. I hope you'll live up to it." Snape smirked at Hermione as he walked into her living room.

Hermione sighed. "Well, at least chances are they won't know the difference between me and someone really knowledgable," she said. "Coffee? Or is that a stupid question?"

His grin was full blown. "I won't answer that. It wouldn't do for me to be rude."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him and went to the kitchen while he made himself comfortable on her sofa.

"So, what's the plan?" she asked, placing a mug in front of him and the plate of biscuits in the middle of the table.

"When you have time, I'll take you to the Malfoys, and you'll explain the internet to Narcissa," Snape said, mug in hand, looking eager to stop talking and start sipping, which he did as soon as he finished the last syllable.

"I see." Hermione regarded him. *Who is this man? Shamelessly taking advantage of me and my coffee, and yet he seems to genuinely care for some people..* "Well, I can make time. Just don't leave me alone with the Malfoys, please. I'm not quite that confident. Yet." There was no point denying she was curious about the Malfoys, the very family who had made her feel inadequate as a witch throughout her teenage years, in whose home she was tortured, and who were now prevented from using the very life force they had never thought *her* worthy of.

"Don't worry, Miss Granger. I'll babysit you. I'll pick you up tomorrow, around six," Snape said and took a last sip, then stood up to take his leave.

Hermione waited a couple of minutes and then visited her neighbour. She couldn't discuss Snape with anyone in the wizarding world, but Evelyn always lent a willing ear, and by talking to her, she'd break no promise.

She must have been a Muggle in a previous life, Lucius thought disdainfully as he watched his wife keenly absorbing the Granger girl's...he refrained from thinking of her as Mudblood out of respect for Severus...lecture on how to make use of the world wide web. *What a concept! Such a small thing, and it provides any information at the push of a button... Those Muggles are, perhaps, not quite as stupid as we thought...*

"Oh, so I *could* make cheese. At least in theory," Narcissa said. She sounded rather enthusiastic. "It doesn't even look that difficult!"

"Anything out there on peafowl?" Lucius couldn't help himself.

"Oh, please, Lucius! Not peafowl again!" Narcissa wrinkled her nose. "Why not something more interesting?"

"Rare breed chickens, perhaps?" Hermione grinned and pulled up the page of the poultry section of the Rare Breeds Survival Trust.

Lucius did a double take on a Brahma, closely followed by a Silky. "Darling, save that page for me, if you don't mind. I think I may want to investigate those." He nearly smirked upon his accomplishment of using the correct jargon.

"Why don't we check out the garden to see if chickens are feasible?" Severus suggested.

"Yes, yes. Why not?" Lucius agreed and led the way.

"There's nearly half an acre of land here," Severus started. "You could easily have a dozen chickens. Stick to no more than two breeds, keep them apart, each with one cockerel if you wish, and you can breed them to your heart's content. Same principle as breeding white peafowl, which by the way the majority of Muggles still call albinos."

Lucius sighed. "Ignorant Muggles! But yes, you have a point. I could breed chickens for egg-laying efficiency. Or show. Show seems to be a big thing amongst Muggles from what our neighbour has said. She breeds her Jerseys for milk and completely disregards shows."

"Wise woman," Severus remarked. "Show is superficial. If you breed animals, do so for something useful. Breed them for character so they become more popular as pets, especially if you go for one of the rare breeds. Or breed them for laying efficiency, and you'll never go hungry."

They had reached the fence now, and a cow hurried towards Lucius. "Hello there, cow." He put his hand out, and the cow licked it as if he were an old friend.

Severus chuckled. "Who knew? The great Malfoy has an affinity with cows."

Lucius snorted. "She's friendly. She doesn't judge me for my past misdeeds."

"Nor do the locals, Lucius."

Lucius had no answer; Severus was right. When the cow was done appreciating her human friend, he slowly turned and started moving towards the house. "Severus, I don't have words for what you've done for us. A thank you seems far too trite."

"Don't be daft. You would've done it for me, too," Severus said.

"Maybe I would, maybe I wouldn't," Lucius allowed. Before he could continue, Severus spoke again.

"Besides, my visits here make me realise how I crave the countryside. I may just buy a house for myself nearby. I would never have realised how much I appreciate the country if you hadn't moved here."

"Severus, you are NOT thanking me," Lucius exclaimed.

Severus shrugged. "I may have; who cares." He rolled his eyes at his oldest friend. "Life is funny. Even a year ago, I was so very angry that I survived that damn bite. Lately, I've come to be thankful for surviving."

"You know, I for one would be most delighted to have you as a neighbour," Lucius said, regarding his friend. He looked not quite as unhealthy these days. He'd filled out a bit...not much, but enough to no longer suspect undernourishment. His hair wasn't greasy either. "Anyway, let's see what the ladies are up to. I hope Narcissa hasn't bought a whole dairy setup."

Severus snorted. "Surely, she'll find a way if she's determined."

"Oh, you're back!" Narcissa exclaimed, looking up from the computer. "More tea? Coffee?"

The two men nodded and sat down on the sofa in the living room.

"So, any success, Granger?" Severus drawled.

Hermione looked up from the computer. "Why, yes. Mrs Malfoy is a fast learner." She grinned. "We may have the pleasure of tasting cheese soon. Oh, and Mr Malfoy, there is a rare chicken breeder barely ten miles from here, in case you're interested. Their website offers a wealth of information on bantams, but they have full-size breeds as well. I've bookmarked the site for you."

Narcissa returned, not only with tea and coffee but sandwiches as well. "My apologies! I forgot the time, and I'm not very good at remembering to eat regularly! You must be starving!"

Considering the speed the sandwiches were devoured, everyone had indeed been hungry. All in all, it turned out to be a successful evening if not outright pleasant. When Hermione visibly suppressed a yawn, Snape rose. "I think we should take our leave. This young lady is evidently tired, and you two must be exhausted, too."

"Thank you so much for a wonderful evening, Severus, and," Narcissa turned to Hermione, *Hermione*. May I call you that?"

"Of course." Hermione smiled. As stilted as the evening had once seemed, the atmosphere was now remarkably friendly. "If you need any help with the computer, just let me know. I'll write down my phone number and e-mail for you."

Niceties and contact information exchanged, Snape and Hermione left the Malfoys and Apparated back to the front of Hermione's flat.

"I know I didn't set out to have fun, but I honestly enjoyed myself tonight, so thank you for a lovely evening," Hermione said as she fumbled for her keys.

"The pleasure is all mine, Miss Granger," Snape assured her before abruptly Disapparating.

"Good night, you bat," Hermione said softly into the night.

Lucius wondered what exactly Narcissa had ordered to be hovering about the front door each morning, only to look disappointed when the postman delivered nothing more than a bill. "Do you think we could manage to take the bus to Cockermouth to have a look at those hens?" he asked as she put a cup of tea in front of him.

"Yes! That should make a nice day out. Shall we take a picnic or eat at a restaurant?" Narcissa asked.

Lucius looked out of the window. "I dare say a picnic is a bit ambitious. These clouds do look like rain."

Narcissa sighed. "Yes. You're right. Oh, well, hopefully there'll be a tearoom or some such nearby. Better take the rain jackets, too." She wrinkled her nose. With no magic, a cloak offered not much protection against rain.

The bus journey was a typically tedious one in the northern English countryside, but the trip was worth every minute of discomfort. The town's buildings were mostly solid stone and, set in the rolling hills...the trademark of the English countryside...surrounded by a smattering of farms, from tiny smallholdings where hens escaped as far as the town centre to large farms with herds of sheep for wool as well as milk and meat.

The farm specialising in rare breed poultry was on the smaller side of businesses, but teeming with visitors and potential customers despite the now steady rain that was just strong enough to be annoying.

The Rhode Islands were beauties. The Wyandottes showed more character and weren't ugly either. Then there were the Leghorns, pure white hens that appealed to Lucius's sense of aesthetics, and their reputation as prolific layers only added to the attraction.

Nothing had prepared him for the bantam section of the farm, though. Silkies strutting more majestically than the whitest peacock he'd ever owned; lavender araucanas displaying their benevolent nature by allowing visiting children to stroke them; the odd black silkie competing for attention with the whites; rosecombs proudly swaying with their enormous tails; bulky Vorwerks resting in the most prominent spots, perfectly aware they were larger and greater than the others. And amongst them all, the divine Brahmins, who just knew they were the gods amongst all bantams.

"How on earth will I be able to choose just one or two breeds?" Lucius asked.

Narcissa laughed. "How ever did you get into peacock breeding, dear?"

"Well, that was easy. Father had an established and reputable flock by the time I could talk, so I grew up breeding peafowl. You know that. But I think I know what you're getting at." Lucius had never wondered whether or not he liked white peacocks or what exactly it was that made him continue breeding them. He liked the whites; he appreciated the challenge to produce the whitest as well as the most docile birds. At that moment, he realised that breeding chickens might be more of a challenge; there was this usefulness factor that peafowl simply did not have. Peafowl were nothing but ornamental, and even that was only the peacocks; the hens were nothing but broodmares.

"Good," his wife said, looking satisfied. "So think about breeding chickens. I will thank you for the eggs. And the fertiliser they produce."

"Weren't you getting into cheese-making or something, dear? I don't see how fertiliser will help that."

"Oh, I don't know. Natural fertiliser is always handy. I'm thinking of a herb garden and perhaps a vegetable patch," Narcissa said.

Lucius nodded slowly. "It will be nice to be more independent from buying food..."

"Oh, no!" Narcissa was dismayed upon seeing postcard-sized note that had come through the mailbox. "My books have arrived, but I need to show some form of identification in order to pick them up. What do I do?"

Lucius was at a loss. "I have no idea," he admitted. He'd never received a package the Muggle way, and the concept of having to show proof of one's existence was as alien to him as it was to his wife. "Perhaps ask Severus when he comes by next."

"Lucius! I can't wait that long! He may not come here for another week, and the note says the package will be returned if not claimed within three days!" Narcissa scrunched her eyes shut.

"Well, email your M... email Miss Granger, then," he said, now impatient. Whatever she expected, it couldn't have been important enough to merit such panic.

"Oh, good idea." Narcissa rushed to the living room and switched on the computer.

Barely thirty minutes later, there was a knock at the door.

Lucius raised his eyebrow and looked at the clock. "It's nearly nine! Who would visit at this hour?"

"Hermione." Narcissa rose and hurried to answer the door. Lucius followed slowly.

Hermione handed her a package and in way of greeting said, "Burn the notification you received, and if anyone ever asks, you know nothing about it." She grinned.

"How did you do that?" Narcissa asked. "Oh, never mind. Magic." She bit her lip.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said softly. "I just figured you were keen on receiving your goods, so I took the liberty of picking it up from your local post office rather than explain how to obtain proof of identity, which will take weeks on end anyway. The red tape in the Muggle world is awful these days and most certainly designed to inconvenience and take as much money as possible from everyone. Though you may seriously want to consider it. It's needed for so many things these days. Oh, and you could have simply ticked the option of having it delivered again on a different date."

"Nobody told me I needed patience for living Muggle style." Narcissa ripped open the package, and her mood lightened visibly.

"Wife, what on earth did you get? And don't be so rude and let the poor girl stand in the door."

"Oh, goodness, I'm so sorry! Do come in, Hermione, please!" Narcissa stepped aside. "Can I get you something? Coffee? Perhaps a glass of wine? Oh, yes, let's share some wine!"

Lucius's frown disappeared when she handed him a book. *Poultry Husbandry*. He could not help but smile.

"Thank you. After today, I doubly appreciate it."

"Call it selfish in that I will be very happy if you find something that interests you enough to keep you from brooding most of the day, but most of all, I would like to see you happy again, and if chickens accomplish that, then bring them." Narcissa turned towards the kitchen, clutching the package tightly and waving at Hermione to follow her.

"I suspect my husband will be busy reading for the next hour at least," she chuckled, "so I have time to look at my... what do you call it? Oh, yes, loot." She emptied the contents on the table, and Hermione suppressed a laugh.

"You really *are* going to make cheese! That's wonderful!"

"Well..." Narcissa started. "Pippamy neighbour...loves the most simple potions that any child can make by the end of their first year at Hogwarts. And she pays me in milk. It suits me well insofar as no funny money is exchanged, but in all honesty, we can't drink ten pints of milk every other day. And I don't like to waste something so precious, given how awful the milk from shops is. So I suppose trying my hand at cheese is the only option for now." She'd found the bottle opener and now poured red wine into two glasses, handing one to Hermione. "I've read everything I could find online, and some cheeses are easier to make than others, so I figured I'll start with those."

Hermione nodded slowly before raising her glass. "Excellent idea, though. And thanks." She took a sip. "Ah, that's good!"

Narcissa laughed. "Thank Severus when you see him. His wine cellar came with the house." She sat down before continuing. "Of course, I have no idea if that cheese-making venture will lead anywhere. I may find myself utterly useless at it." She sighed. "It's not easy..."

"No," Hermione agreed. "But you are doing admirably well, and you have friends in the wizarding world who are more than willing to help you. And I'm not just talking about Snape."

"Or yourself?" Narcissa enquired, her face devoid of expression.

Hermione shrugged. "I don't give my contact details to just anyone," she said. "There are people out there who realise what grave injustice has been done to your family, and you will learn more in the coming days or weeks. Sorry I can't say more at this time."

Narcissa took a sip of wine. "No need. Strange as it may sound, I'm in a not exactly happy but at the very least *content* place right now. Draco, thank goodness, is safe and has his magic, and we, somehow, make do without it. It's hard, yes, but I've learned it's doable. Perhaps one day I'll even get used to it."

"Perhaps," Hermione agreed. "I admire you for the stance you've taken. I don't know if I could have."

Narcissa laughed. "You've done far more admirable things; though believe me, once you spend a few months under the control of the Dark Lord, nothing is impossible."

Hermione nodded, lost for words. She took another sip of her wine. After a while, she said, "I should go. It's late, and by the sound of it, you've had a long day."

"Oh, the day may have been long, but it was wonderful, no matter how annoying British public transport is," Narcissa said, chuckling, and told her about the visit to the chicken farm. "And it's been a lovely evening, too. I hope you'll visit again soon."

"I'll be happy to," Hermione said, rising from the chair.

Lucius settled on Vorwerks and Araucanas. As attractive as the Brahmins were, he'd decided to focus on efficiency and character, so that breed was out for now. One day he might indulge and start breeding Brahmins or Silkies, but for now it seemed wiser to focus on the practical. Building a two-sectioned hen house took only a week, admittedly with a bit of magical help from Severus, and then Lucius was ready to pick up two trios of each breed. The journey back home was far more tedious than building the hen house. *This blasted public transport system...*

The garden now had a purpose. Narcissa would give it more of that. In the meantime, the cattle didn't mind the birds in the least, and the cow still came running to the fence whenever she spotted Lucius.

Narcissa smiled as she watched her husband early one morning. He opened the two doors of the chicken coop, greeting each chicken as it waddled out into the daylight. The displaced couple still had a long way to go, but she had no doubt that even without magic, both she and Lucius would be able to find happiness again. Eventually.

Hermione checked the time. Ginny would be out shopping or helping George in the shop; she never spent Saturday afternoon at home. *Now or never*, she thought and Apparated to Godric's Hollow, the Potters' home since their wedding over a year ago.

Breathing a sigh of relief about her perfect timing, she hugged Harry tightly and looked at him. "Married life suits you."

Harry smiled. "Yes, I think it does. I'm glad you've come, Hermione. Haven't seen you in ages! Obviously, you've wanted to find me alone, right?" He grinned at her sheepish expression.

"Look, I love Ginny, you know that. But this is... sensitive." There was no point pretending anything where Harry was concerned. After all they'd been through together, he could read her as well as she him. Something Ron had never learned, she thought with a slight pang. *Go away, ugly ego*, she urged and, for good measure, wished all happiness upon Ron and Parvati before her thoughts focused on the task before her.

Harry gazed at her expectantly. "What do you need?" He motioned for her to follow him inside.

"Two Muggle IDs. That's all."

Harry laughed. "That's all? Well, you aren't asking for much!" He sobered quickly, looking at his friend's expression. "You're helping the Malfoys?"

Hermione sighed. "And what if I am?"

"Hermione, it's fine! I promise I'll work harder on this if it is for them. They don't deserve the fate they've been handed; you know my opinion." His eyes met hers. "I'm just surprised that you're actively helping them. I mean, given the history and all."

Hermione shrugged. "Well, I think I moved past that. They're humans who were judged extremely harshly. Anything good they ever did doesn't count in the Wizengamot's eyes, and our esteemed panel of twelve judges couldn't give a toss if they survive or not. My idea of a fair world does not include unjust punishments, you know."

"Nor mine, Hermione." Harry's voice was heavy. "I won't ask how you came about taking them on as your cause, but a few people owe me favours, so I should have no trouble procuring Muggle IDs for them. Give me a week or so." He smiled at her in that way he'd done more than a decade earlier, when they'd first become friends, and she felt love well up within her.

"Thanks, Harry. I won't tell you how much that means to me because I don't have the words for it, and you know it anyway."

Lucius's heart soared as he carefully balanced three eggs in his hand. "Cissy! We have eggs! Can we have them for breakfast?" he called as he entered the house. "Look at these! Aren't they beautiful?"

His gaze switched from the prize in his hand to his wife, who smiled broadly.

"Oh, those araucana ones are so pretty! And the Vorwerk! It's big!"

"The blue ones are almost too pretty to break." He cast a wistful look at them. "Alas, they're laid to be eaten, since none of the hens are broody, so let's, shall we?"

Narcissa created an omelet that could have withstood the stiffest competition. Green onion, mushrooms, some very young home-made hard cheese, combined with only just-laid eggs, served with fried tomatoes and toast: truly a breakfast worthy of royalty.

"You know," Lucius said while chewing, "I could almost get used to this lifestyle. I mean, it positively wrecks my life to not have my magic, but I've learned a lot since we left."

Narcissa stopped her fork mid-air. "Yes, we both have. And while I would prefer to have magic for all the mundane tasks, I actually enjoy living here."

Oh, please, do come over! Stay for dinner! Narcissa answered Hermione's email, keenly looking forward to news from the wizarding world and perhaps learning a few more useful websites from Hermione over a glass of wine. The Muggle-born had turned out to be quite decent company; never imposing, always helpful while maintaining a dignity that was beyond Narcissa's comprehension. Helping just for the sake of helping was not a known trait amongst either the Malfoys or the Blacks. And yet, it fascinated her to the point of wanting to learn more.

"Here you go," Hermione said, handing her a bunch of papers. "Now you can travel, retrieve any items left at the post office or anywhere else, and even open a bank account if you feel the need. Just... don't drive a car if you don't know how."

Narcissa stared at the passports and driving licenses. "They're real? How did you manage that, Hermione?"

Hermione laughed. "Yes, they're real. I told you you have friends in the wizarding world." She accepted the glass of wine Narcissa held out to her and sat down at the kitchen table. "You've come such a long way in such a short time, it is truly amazing. I want you to know that Harry is still working on exonerating both of you, but I don't need to point out how long this may take, and the easier your life is in the meantime, the better."

"Thank you," Narcissa said. "We don't dare hope, so we have the energy to put into creating the best situation possible in the circumstances. It isn't too bad, really."

Hermione nodded. "I know it sucks to be Muggle if you know the wizarding world. But on the other hand, there is a lot to explore, and at least you're not pre-conditioned with all their dogma."

Narcissa chuckled darkly. "Don't you think we have enough dogma in the wizarding world?"

"Yes, absolutely, though it's... different to the Muggle world. It's a subject you may want to get into if all the appeals to the Wizengamot lead nowhere. But if you don't have to, then don't bother, because it's a seriously convoluted issue, a rabbit hole that runs far deeper than anything the wizarding world has ever known."

"I'll leave that for you to tell me another day," Narcissa offered, and Hermione accepted with a nod, sipping her wine contentedly.

What passed as the sun these days wasn't even fully risen this early October morning when a knocking sound woke Narcissa. Lucius was still out cold; she suspected he'd shared more than a couple of glasses of wine with Severus after she'd gone to bed the previous night.

Narcissa rose and looked closer at the window where the sound came from. *An owl!* She hurried to let the beast in, surprised, and lead the way to the kitchen. "I think I have some bacon in the fridge; give me a minute," she muttered, but the owl hooted so impatiently that Narcissa relieved it off its load a thin, light, wrapped package.

Instantly, the owl flew to the nearest window. Narcissa opened it, and the owl was gone. "Well..." she muttered and ripped open the package, blissfully ignorant of any potential danger an owl-delivered package might hold for a Malfoy and oblivious to her husband entering the kitchen.

Looking at the contents, she gasped, then straightened the parchment wrapped around one of the sticks.

Lucius stood there, mesmerised by the items Narcissa was holding in her hand.

She had noticed him now and started to read out loud:

"Narcissa, Lucius,

These may not look like much, but make no mistake: both are fully operational wands and no less powerful, even if they look barely more than miniatures. News of your fate has even reached the Amazon, and I figured wands would come in most useful; these are untraceable and their spells undetectable, made from a wood that is indigenous to a small stretch along the Amazon River. The owl is a type of clone that would have self-destructed if it had been intercepted, so you don't have to worry about any foul play. Be aware, however, if the wand is used with ill intention, it will backfire.

Please tell your Muggle-born friend the other blonde is well and happy.

Blessings to you,

Just a Friend"

Narcissa burst into tears, and Lucius took one wand out of her hands. "*Accio feta cheese!*" His voice sounded foreign to his own ears, casting a spell for the first time in months, and his hand was shaking slightly.

There was a *pop*, and a square of feta flew right into his hands. He'd never felt so accomplished in his life. "This needs rinsing," he muttered and walked to the sink. After holding it under running water for a few moments, he took a bite, ignoring his wife's wide eyes. "Mmmmm... Blimey, woman, this is good."

He stopped mid bite when Narcissa stood right in front of him, her wand aimed at his face. "If you ever mess with my cheese again, I'll hex you six ways to Sunday, husband. You burst the lid in the fridge, and now I need a new container with a functioning lid, *and* the fridge needs cleaning because the brine spilt everywhere!"

She looked glorious when she was angry, and the power of a wand only added to the glory. Lucius finished chewing and bowed. "I shall clean the fridge and repair the lid, milady."

Both burst into laughter. "Oh, it's wonderful to have a wand, whoever sent it!"

Lucius nodded, sobering quickly. "Whoever did deserves an Order of Merlin."

Narcissa smiled wryly. "No chance for that one, but how about we offer an Order of Malfoy?"

"Wife," he snickered, "you're incorrigible."

"And you love me for it."

Life hadn't been bad, Lucius reflected, given the quagmire they'd found themselves in. But now, with a wand, everything suddenly improved beyond his wildest imagination. Of course, he didn't know the best spell to clean the chicken coops, and it would have been foolish to get either Severus or Granger to find the relevant books; he had no doubt the Ministry kept a close eye on both. But just having a wand and being able to use even the most rudimentary spells beat mucking out the coops no end. To the chickens it made no difference.

Hermione,

The Ministry is onto the Malfoys using magic. The enclosed book will help place spells around their property to prevent ill-intending people to enter and such. You may want to get Snape to help you.

Harry

"Oh, fuck," Hermione muttered and immediately sent an owl to Snape. Seeing the Malfoys back in Azkaban really wasn't on her list of priorities. She'd come to enjoy spending time with Narcissa.

Two hours later, they met in front of the Malfoys' home as Snape had suggested.

"I've barely read ten pages, you know," she said by way of greeting.

He smirked. "There is only one opening through which the Ministry could have found out. Someone of Percy Weasley's calibre is probably employed to trace any magical activity in wholly Muggle areas. It's easy enough to... fog the magic, so to speak...to make it look like psychic phenomena. Hold on to that book, though. It's useful."

Barely two hours later, the property was fully proofed against magical detection, and Hermione and Severus collapsed on the living room sofa, accepting Narcissa's tea and sandwiches.

"How can I ever thank you enough?" Lucius asked, sipping his tea.

"Well," Severus drawled, putting a hand on Hermione's arm. "Now that Hermione has managed the impossible, you could find out which houses in the neighbourhood are for sale."

Hermione blushed.

"What impossible feat have you managed, Hermione?" Narcissa asked.

"Let me guess," Lucius sneered, "she's written a book."

Severus laughed. "Right in one." Then he turned serious. "She's written a book indeed. About the second war. From a Muggle-born's perspective. And that book exonerates the Malfoys. Oh, make no mistake," he chuckled darkly, "the Malfoys are portrayed the way they are. But if they're not returned their property and freedom once that book becomes the biggest hit in post-war magical Britain, then I don't know what will have to be done. She is not apologetic, that one."

Hermione stood abruptly. "I... I need to go now." Not waiting for either Malfoy to rise, she rushed to the exit. By the time Narcissa reached the door, there was no trace of her.

Narcissa returned to the living room, looking intently at Severus. "What is it? Did you break her trust? Is she clueless how you feel about her? Or is it simply panic on her part?"

Severus's eyes widened. "What on earth do you mean?"

Lucius laughed. "Really, Severus."

The knock on her door became more persistent, and Hermione gave in. She pointed her wand at the door to open it. "It better be good, whoever you are."

Her eyes widened when Severus stepped in and closed the door behind him. "You silly woman, you."

"Look, I'm sorry," she started, but he put his hand on her mouth.

"No need. It's my fault. I shouldn't have boasted about your achievement."

Hermione moved his hand and laughed. "Oh, you silly man! Do you know how much it means that my book actually registered with you? When I gave you the manuscript, I didn't even expect you to read it!"

"Why on earth not?"

"I thought you were just being polite." She looked sheepish.

"How can you be at the same time the most intelligent being I've ever met and the most stupid?"

"Did you come here to insult me? If so, piss off."

"No, you daft thing. I came here to ask you to help me choose a property. I... I just can't imagine not having you in my life, so I figured it's best I ask you to live with me."

The widest eyes he'd ever seen met him, followed by a broad smile and a contented sigh. "I prefer alpacas over chickens, though."

"Alpacas it is, then. As long as you choose the ones with black fleeces."

The Ministry of Magic was in a state of panic. It happened every now and then, of course, that a family moved from a wizarding area to a purely Muggle one; however, the recent development of some of the most prominent families moving away from the wizarding conclaves was highly disconcerting, even more so as they all seemed to gather in the village of Crook.

Crook had been barely a spot on the maps before the Malfoys chose it as their place of residence. In Severus Snape's property no less. Crook remained a Muggle village even when Snape bought another house there to move himself. But the fact that he'd taken Miss Granger, one of the most celebrated and shy war heroines, with him to settle down caused a ruckus in the wizarding world. The Potters followed within two months, and then Miss Lovegood found an ideal property just on the edge of Crook, opposite a dairy farm run by a Squib named Pippa. Some esteemed members of the Ministry considered taking the Squib out, but that would have caused much suspicion. This particular Squib was well connected to many of the wizarding families who'd entered the village, and as much as she was a thorn in the side of both Muggle and Magical governments, she had far too much exposure to be *accident*ed or *suicid*ed.

Percy Weasley in particular was beside himself when his younger, recently married brother moved to Crook. But his pleadings on behalf of the Ministry were to no avail. "Look, mate," Ron had said, "you go your way, and we go ours. And ours happens to be in support of a fair world. Since we can't have that here in the obvious places of wizarding Britain, we're moving to where we can work together with other like-minded wizards and witches." And that was that.

The beauty, as wizards and witches found out soon enough, was that the Ministry of Magic had no jurisdiction over anyone in Crook, not even its own people. The Muggle government had no jurisdiction over any people, of course, except for those who allowed it, albeit unwittingly, but the magical folks never even fell for the tricks the Muggles used. So Crook grew rather fast into an independent village, inhabited by both wizards and Muggles, both living peacefully next to each other.

"A toast to Pippa!" Lucius roared as he raised his glass. He looked at his friends new, not so new, and positively old. "If it weren't for her cow, Daisy, I would never be where I am today, and the Ministry can send me another hundred missives to inform me my family is welcomed back into the wizarding world, I shall stay here with my wife..." he put his arm around her "...and my friends." His other hand waved over the crowd in the garden.

Harry clapped and was quickly joined by the others. "I, for one, am glad you decided to move here, Lucius! I would never have found such peace otherwise."

"I'm glad you think so, Mr Potter," Narcissa said, smiling.

"Potter," Lucius chuckled, "did you ever manage to light a fire the Muggle way?"

Harry looked bewildered. "N... no. Should I?"

Both Malfoys burst into laughter. "Oh, you should make the effort." Lucius chuckled. "Learning that skill saved my sanity."

Fin

A/N: There is the saying that it takes a village to write a story. In this case, it is the plain truth. This story would not have been written into existence if it weren't for linlawless, who never tired of cheering, prodding, bullying, and praising, Teaoli, whose gentle pointing led me to see Lucius in a slightly different light, thus making him even more dimensional, both regular and occasional participants of The Petulant Poetess Saturday Night Drabble chat, who gave advice galore when it came to chickens, country life, and other facets, and last but by no means least Pennfana, who cast a critical eye on the final version. My grateful thanks to all of them.

Reviews are love and inspiring to the Muse.