

# Ye Gentlewizard's Guide to Courtshippe & Matrimonie

*by gingertart*

Twenty-nine years later, Rose Weasley declares her love for Scorpius Malfoy. Molly orders Arthur to have nothing to do with the Malfoys, so Hermione, now widowed, finds herself acting as the head of her family. Naturally, she turns to a book for advice on courting rituals; however, it fails to warn her about jealous Malfoys, the usefulness of owlBay, hungry horses, wizards in cricket whites, interfering elves, perspicacious offspring, the lure of libraries or the life-long loyalty of Crups. She does discover a fondness for elf-made wine and the production thereof, even though 'Château Bonfoi Elf-made Wines' has absolutely nothing to do with Lucius and everything to do with a mysterious arbiter – who is perfectly capable of telling Lucius exactly where he can stick his wand.

## Part 1: In Which Hermione Consults a Book.

*Chapter 1 of 5*

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*Ye Announcemente of ye Intention to Courte should be conveyed with all Due Diligence & Solemnity to ye Respective Families. Ye Heades of ye Families shall responde with Promptitude & Circumspection. Mickle Gaiety & Celebration doth ensue.*

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It was a perfectly ordinary Sunday lunch at the Burrow until, in an unfortunate lull in the conversation, Lucy Weasley reached for the horseradish sauce and turned to her cousin. "Is Scorpius going to officially court you, Rose?" she enquired.

Rose nodded. "Yes, although he hasn't told his family yet."

"I sincerely hope he'll do nothing of the sort!" Lucy's father, Percy, sounded horrified.

"Scorpius *Malfoy*?" screeched Granny Molly, ensuring everyone's undivided attention. "Over my dead body! Arthur, you're the head of the family! You tell her! We forbid it!"

Her grandchildren stared at Molly, their expressions ranging from astonished to in Rose's case rapidly increasing dismay. Tears welled up in Rose's eyes as she thrust back her chair and stood up.

"I'm of age!" she said in a trembling voice. "I can marry who I like!"

"Don't be ridiculous! You won't if you wish to remain a part of this family!" Molly snapped, "*AMalfoy* indeed! Your grandfather will have nothing whatsoever to do with that family and neither will I! What would your poor, dear father have said?"

Vibrating with fury as she saw the tears spilling from her daughter's eyes, Hermione reached for her wand, but found her wrist seized in an iron grasp. A hand clamped over her mouth, preventing her from telling Molly exactly what she thought of her.

Rose ran from the room as Hermione attempted to free herself, but years of flying with the Harpies had given Ginny Potter a grip like a sloth.

"That was below the belt," Harry muttered. His wife hissed, "Send someone to look after Rose, for Merlin's sake! Hermione, stop struggling! It isn't worth it!"

Harry turned to his daughter on his other side. "Lils? Go and make sure Rosie's okay, will you?"

Lily nodded and followed Rose, collecting Victoire and Teddy on her way out.

"That went about as well as could be expected," Albus Potter said, calmly helping himself to Lily's Yorkshire pudding before it got cold and sunk in the middle.

Harry and Ginny stood up, seized Hermione by an arm each and Apparated straight to their house in Godric's Hollow.

"Now you can go ahead and swear to your heart's content," Ginny told her.

"Bugger, sod it and shit!" Hermione snarled, momentarily channelling her late husband. "Sorry, Gin, but your mother's a complete cow! How dare she tell poor Rose that she's not a part of the family?" She rounded on her friends with her fists on her hips. "Hold on, did you two know about this?"

Harry sighed and ran his hand back through his already scruffy hair. "Yeah, Al told us. You know he and Scorpius are still friends. Didn't ~~you~~ know?"

"Not officially. I knew it was getting serious between them, but she hadn't said anything about the courting bit. Oh hell! Ron really would have been furious, wouldn't he?"

"Afraid so," Ginny said, sinking down onto the sofa. "But he'd have come round in the end, you know that. Your Rosie had him wound round her little finger. Mum's going to be the stumbling-block. Once she gets an idea in her head, there's no persuading her, and Dad will do as he's told, as usual."

"This isn't going to be pretty," Harry prophesied.

Ginny nodded and Summoned a bottle of elf-made red wine. "I think that this calls for the good stuff, don't you?"

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It was a perfectly ordinary Sunday lunch at Malfoy Manor until, in an unfortunate lull in the conversation, Scorpius announced in between the fish course and the roast, "I intend to court Rose Weasley."

His mother gave a little gasp and then took a sip of water to compose herself. Draco refrained from responding at all in front of the elves. Lucius aligned his fish knife and fork precisely in the centre of his plate, placed his fingertips together and nodded at the chief elf for the roast guinea-fowls to be presented. Only when the elves had popped out again did he turn to his grandson.

"I cannot allow our birthright to fall into the hands of the offspring of a *Weasley*, Scorpius. If you must do this thing, then it will not be as my heir." He gave a tight little smile, as if satisfied that his reply covered all eventualities.

Scorpius was far too well brought up to shrug, but his expression conveyed his lack of surprise. "Rose has a very good position at Gringotts as an Arithmancer, and even if she didn't, my income alone would be sufficient to support us."

"Your income? My dear boy, you can't expect to continue to work for Château Bonfoi if you alienate yourself from your family!"

"With all due respect, sir, it isn't up to you whether I keep my job!"

"Temper, Scorpius," Astoria murmured, and Scorpius nodded in acknowledgement of the rebuke.

He turned to Draco. "Father? Aren't you going to say anything?"

Draco cleared his throat and glanced uneasily at Lucius, then at his wife, finally meeting his son's grey eyes. "I've no complaints at all about your work. Since you joined the company, our profits have increased at a rate of twenty percent a year, as you're well aware."

Scorpius' hands tightened on the silver cutlery, and he leaned forward in his seat. "And...?"

Draco's smile was the image of his father's. "Your employment record is exemplary, and I'm hardly likely to sack the popular public face of 'Château Bonfoi Elf-made Wines', am I?"

Lucius' eyes widened, and a faint flush coloured his high cheek-bones. "Are you intending to defy me in this, Draco?"

Draco lifted his napkin and patted at his lips before replacing the starched linen upon his lap. "When I founded 'Château Bonfoi Elf-made Wines', I made sure that there were no direct associations with the name of Malfoy. Every Knut and Sickle that I invested came from my Black inheritance through my grandmother. I'm afraid that you have no say whatsoever in the running of that particular business, Father, and that includes the hiring and firing of my staff."

Lucius sat very still, breathing through his nose, in and out, before turning his increasingly strained smile to Scorpius. "Tell me, which of the multitude of Weasleys has caught your eye? Who are this girl's parents?"

"Rose's parents were both heroes of the second Voldemort war," Scorpius said, not failing to note the slight twitch below his grandfather's eye. "Her father was an Auror; he died four years ago." Another twitch: four years ago, Narcissa Malfoy had died tragically at the wands of a group of so-called Death Eaters, who had considered her to be a traitor to their ideals. "Her mother's a very accomplished witch."

Lucius sniffed. "Stop hedging, boy. Remind me: who's the mother?"

"Hermione Granger-Weasley."

There was a distant tinkling crash as an elf dropped a handful of cutlery.

"Oh, goody," Lucius said, his precise vowels lending the word a certain gravitas, "That plain-featured house-elf-bothering termagant?" His patrician face took on a far-away expression. "I see. Well, since the witch is a Mud... excuse me, a *Muggle-born*, we shall see how well she stands up to the pure-blood courting rituals, shall we? *The full* courting rituals, as laid down in 1569." His grey eyes glittered, and his expression was suddenly that of a predator. "Including a few procedures specific to the Malfoy family. As head of the household, I must insist upon this."

"Dad, help," Scorpius whispered, but was sensible enough to say it under his breath.

"In which case, as the father of one of the participants, I'm entitled to demand an arbiter," Draco remarked. "Just to ensure that everyone acts in a completely fair and exemplary manner." Draco met Scorpius' increasingly desperate gaze with a faint smirk. "Didn't Scorpius' god-father mention that he'll be visiting England for a month or two? I suggest that you ask him to mediate, Father."

"That's nice," Astoria remarked in her sweet, rather girlish voice. "It'll be lovely to see Severus again, won't it? Do pass the carrots, dear."

"Oh, bugger," said Lucius, giving up all pretence of dignity.

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*Ye Familie of Each Participant shall make Themsell familiar with ye Rituals, Rites, Ceremonials, Covenants & Customs for ye Goode Faith & Easy Understanding of Each with ye Other. Or notte, as ye Case may be.*

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"Hi, Mum. I found this on owlBay," Hermione's son remarked, tossing a brown-paper wrapped package in her general direction. "Thought it might come in useful."

She Summoned it with a flick of her wrist. "Thanks, Hugo. I just made a pot of tea; help yourself." She unwrapped the parcel. It was a very old, battered and musty book with a rubbed cover.

"*Ye Gentlewizard's Guide to Courtshippe & Matrimonie; being an Essential Resource for Halfe-Bluddes, Gryffyndors, Hufflepuffes & Others who are about to embark upon Pure-Bludde Society & are desirous of notte making Compleate and Utter Nyncompooes of Themselves*' by 'An Anonymous Witche of Ryte Goode Standyng. Well, thank you, Hugo, I'm sure it has great curiosity value."

Hugo snorted. "A bit more than that. Albus told me that Scorpius says that his grandfather demands that the courtship follows the most archaic and bloody stupid customs that he can find."

"And I should care what Lucius Malfoy demandswhy?"

Hugo shrugged and Summoned the milk jug. "I s'pose Scorp doesn't want to be cut out of the will, I dunno, but he wouldn't have told Al if he didn't want you to know. They're Slytherins, you know how indirect they can be. That old book might give you advance warning when Lucius gets going on his diabolical plots and schemes."

"And I suppose you're going to have a good laugh about it," Hermione grumbled, but without rancour.

Hugo grinned. "Luckily for me, I'm only an ickle lad of twenty-two."

When Hermione raised an eyebrow at him, he gestured at the book with his teaspoon. "According to that, if I was over twenty-five, I'd be Rose's head of family. Granny won't let Granddad have anything to do with the betrothal, so he won't act as head. Dad would have acted as de facto head of our bit of the family if he'd lived. Next in line is Grandpa Granger, but he's a Muggle so he can't do it. I'm too young, and you're the only magical person on your side, so until I'm old enough, you're head of Rose's immediate family, even though you're only a humble witch. Does that mean I can tell you what to do once I'm twenty-five?"

"You can try," Hermione told him, turning the book over in her hands; "'Only a humble witch' indeed! Never say that in front of your Aunt Ginny, young man, unless you're prepared to be Bat-Bogeyed for a week."

The book had a certain archaic charm, she supposed, an air of genteel smugness. It smelled of lavender and dust; the frayed edges of the pages reminded her of old lace doilies.

"I'll be able to order Rose around, though, won't I?" Hugo mused.

"No, you won't, because once she's married, her head of family will be Lucius Malfoy."

They gazed at each other with equally concerned expressions.

"Not good," said Hugo. "I wouldn't wish that on anyone, not even a pesky older sister." And Hermione could only agree.

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*Ye Precise & Inestimable Usefull Grimoire of Eponyma de Mallfoye; contayning Matters pertainyng to Betrothal, Matrimonie, Fornyckation & ye Lyke; compiled duryng myne Tenure as Orchystrator of Matches & Marriage Broker for ye Pure of Bludde. Ys Grimoire nott to be rede by anye Childe, Elfe, Mudde-Bludde, Member of ye Lower Orders or Personne of a Delicate Disposition.*

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Lucius watched the two elves as they lifted the enormous book, fully three feet across, into a wheelbarrow and conveyed it to the sloping reading-desk before the window of the library. The Grimoire had not taken kindly to having magic cast upon it, as the elf currently being assisted out of the room by one of his fellows could testify or at least, could testify once he had regained his customary mouthparts. As a Malfoy, Lucius was entitled to open and read the Grimoire, but could not recall ever doing so before, not even when Draco had asked Astoria to marry him. Narcissa had been alive then, and her steadying hand had guided the family through the intricacies of pure-blood rituals and betrothal alliances. The Greengrass family was pure-blood, of course, and Astoria herself was perfectly unobjectionable, so on that occasion, Lucius had had no cause to interfere.

Lucius stroked the cover of the book. It let out a sigh, scented with dried ink and ancient parchment. What would Narcissa have said if she had lived to see her beloved grandson fancying himself in love with the daughter of the Granger woman? Lucius had an idea that he knew exactly what Narcissa would have said, and he firmly quashed the thought before it took root. Narcissa had been a pragmatic witch; she would have made the best of it. Lucius was forged from sterner stuff. He opened the Grimoire.

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*Either Famile may engage ye Services of an Arbiter to ensure ye Correcte Conduct & Gentlewizardly Behaviour of all Participants. Ye Arbiter to be chosen from ye Moste Upstandyng & Respected of all Wizards Knowne to Ye Familie Who Muste Notte be Drawn too Far to Ye Darke or Unhynged or a Lecher or a Drunken Sott or be Otherwyse Rendered Unsuitable.*

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Lucius Malfoy waved a languid hand, and the decanter floated across the room to refill his guest's glass. "At least I still have something to offer you," he said rather petulantly, "unless the Château Bonfoi elves have taken to brewing single malt when not engaged in viniculture."

"None of our vineyards possess either the appropriate climate or the peat-filtered water," Severus Snape replied. Over the years, his voice had gradually regained its silken cadences until one would hardly know that his throat had been all but ripped out by an overgrown viper. "Why the forsaken expression, or the self-pity?"

"My grandson has taken it in his head to fall in love with a witch," he said. "An extremely unsuitable witch."

Snape sipped his Ardbeg. "Really? Is she a floozy?"

"I almost wish she was! I'd have Draco and Astoria on my side in that case. No, she's a Gryffindor, damn it, one of the offspring of the Golden Trio."

"The Potter girl?" Snape twirled his glass, making the amber liquid glint in the light of the many candles.

"No, the other one. The Mu-Muggleborn's daughter."

"Old habits die hard, do they not?" Snape's voice was as smooth as the whisky. "Do you forget that I'm the son of a Muggle, or do you prefer to ignore that inconvenient fact?"

Lucius grimaced. "Yes, well, you don't flaunt your more unfortunate heritage. You never attempted to introduce legislation that would have resulted in my elves being thrown out of their ancestral home, or to develop this this preposterous compost spiderweb thingy in a society that was perfectly happy and stable as it was."

"If you mean computers and the World Wide Wizarding Web, Lucius, you might remember that Château Bonfoi has a powerful internet presence, and owlBay is now the largest marketplace in the Wizarding community worldwide. The Granger-Weasley woman's CPU shielding spell is possibly the greatest innovation since the invention of the wand although I'd rather not make her any more insufferable by telling her."

Lucius made a dismissive gesture. "All ephemera, my dear fellow, chaff blowing in the wind. Now our old traditions, on the other hand, are well worth our time. Let's see how well the insufferable witch deals with them!"

"Such as?"

"Courting and marriage rituals. Since Scorpius is set upon this little upstart of a witch, this newcomer, this ingénue, I insist that the thing is done properly. With due respect. Dignity. Tradition. Don't snort, Severus; it is unbecoming, particularly in someone with such a patrician proboscis."

"So how do I fit into this plan of yours?"

"Draco requested you as arbiter."

Snape snorted again "Bloody marvellous. What do I get out of it?"

"My undying gratitude? A bottle of the Ardbeg single malt?"

"Unlimited access to your library *and* your whisky stash might just do it."

"You mean you'll agree? Just like that? Have you been away from Slytherins for too long, old chap?"

"It's been too long since I had a damn good laugh," Snape said. "I shall be interested to see who has the ~~the~~ *last* laugh, too."

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"Oh, bollocks," Hermione said, "with knobs on."

"Yes, bollocks are usually associated with knobs," Hugo agreed.

The trouble with having grown-up children, Hermione had found, was that she could no longer shock them. Not so long ago, Hugo would have been horrified by the idea of his mother even thinking about sex.

"Malfoy has appointed an arbiter," she said. Hugo peered at her over the top of the medical textbook propped against the toast rack.

"A what?"

"Is that a kind of go-between?" Rose enquired from behind the *Daily Prophet's* business supplement.

"A mediator, apparently, who is someone who ensures that neither side tries to take advantage."

"To ensure that Malfoy squeezes every possible advantage he can, you mean," Hugo muttered.

Much as she loved Scorpius, even Rose appeared to view Draco with caution, and she trusted Lucius about as far as she could *Accio* him. Ron had created a deep suspicion in his children of the older Malfoys. Hermione had done nothing to counteract her husband's indoctrination after all, she had been tortured in Malfoy Manor while Lucius stood aside and did nothing. She regretted her lapse in judgement now. If Rose wanted to go through with this courtship and marriage, Rose's closest relatives needed to develop a reasonably cordial relationship with Scorpius' father and grandfather, or else risk a large rift developing between the happy couple right from the start. Scorpius loved his family quite as deeply as Rose loved her own.

"Listen," Hermione said, unrolling the scroll and weighing down the end with the marmalade, "'Dear Mrs Granger-Weasley, it is incumbent upon me to inform you that my father and I have engaged an arbiter to oversee the ongoing courtship and prenuptial arrangements between our families. He will contact you privately to schedule a preliminary meeting. If you decide to contract your own arbiter, kindly provide details at your convenience. Yours sincerely, Draco Abraxas Malfoy.'"

"Oh, *Draco* Malfoy. I thought you meant Lucius," Rose said, turning the page of her newspaper. "That isn't so bad."

"Why?" Hugo asked.

"Scorpius's Mum and Dad aren't set against me. It's only Lucius who's horrified at the idea of a Gryffindor half-blood marrying into the family."

"Yes, well, 'only Lucius' is the head of the family, and he's a very dangerous wizard," Hermione said shortly.

"Anyone would think you didn't like him, Mum." Hugo closed his book and glanced at the clock on the wall. His hand pointed to 'Late for work again unless you Apparate NOW!' while Rose's declared 'On schedule as usual' and Hermione's wavered between 'Going to work' and 'Taking the day off, damn it.'

"Go on and don't forget your sandwiches," Hermione said.

Hugo nodded, grabbed his Trainee-Healer's green-striped robes and his lunch-box and Apparated away to St. Mungo's.

Rose folded the newspaper and handed it over to her mother. "I might try some arithmantic projections for the Weasley and Malfoy families and see what happens if I link our futures together," she remarked, Summoning her briefcase. "Want to see them?"

"My Arithmancy's a bit rusty, but I'll take a look out of interest. It'll be too general to be able to separate out individual destinies, though."

"Yes, Mum," Rose sighed, giving her mother a quick one-armed hug, "I am a professional Arithmancer, if you remember?"

Hermione laughed and waved her away. "Go on, Gringotts awaits you, darling. Have a good day."

"I might be late back. I've got to explain to my boss why I can no longer handle the Château Bonfoi investments. Goblins aren't as bothered by conflicts of interest as they

should be."

Hermione glanced down at the back page of the *Daily Prophet*. A dashing, blond wizard poured himself a glass of wine under a banner proclaiming "Betrothal? Marriage? Birth? Two-hundredth birthday party? Celebrate your own very special day with a bottle of Château Bonfoi's Premier Cru Elf-made Champagne from our recently acquired vineyard in the heart of France's Champagne region. 'Château Bonfoi Elf-made Wines', supplier of magical wines for magical people!" Scorpius Malfoy gazed seriously at her, raised his glass with an understated, elegant inclination of his head, and took a sip of champagne. In the background, a particularly wizened-looking elf held up a bottle, examining it critically before replacing it and scowling at the camera.

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Hermione looked up from her desk as her business partner ambled in, a mug of coffee in one hand and a sheaf of brochures in the other. "Hermie, love, you busy?"

"I am if you insist on calling me that."

"Hermie-wormy," he pouted, making kissy noises, "don't be an old grouch. Look what the advertising agency has come up with now! You do know they're the people who dreamed up that excellent campaign for Château Bonfoi wines, don't you? I wonder if we could get the gorgeous Scorpius to pose for our ads, or whether he's exclusively theirs?"

"He's straight," Hermione said, "and no, he wouldn't work for us: conflict of interest. He's going out with my daughter."

Malcolm Baddock, ex-Slytherin and co-founder with Hermione of 'The Distinctive Charms Agency Ltd., Curse-Breaking, House-Warding and Custom Spells', rolled his eyes. "Darling girl, did you really think you could keep that a secret? The goss is he's going to formally court her. True or false?"

"Yes, it's true."

Malcolm cocked his head, reminding her of a small, bright-eyed bird, perhaps a robin: something sharp and dapper, certainly, and rather inclined to pick up worms. "You don't seem pleased. Don't you like him?"

"He's lovely," Hermione admitted, "I just have problems with the rest of his family."

"Hm, yes, Draco was a bit of a prick in school, wasn't he? He's better now, though, surely? And Astoria is reasonable; all the Greengrass girls were pleasant, if slightly vapid."

"Lucius."

"Ah. Yes, I see your point. Rather lethal, that one."

"Only 'rather'?"

"Still stunningly handsome, of course," Malcolm said as he wandered towards the door, "Getting even better with age."

"Straight."

"Oh, really?" Malcolm looked back over his shoulder. "I always thought he had a suspiciously close relationship with Professor Snape, but there you go, shows what I know. You're the one with the special connection with the Malfoys! There's an elf to see you, by the way wouldn't tell me what he wants."

"Why didn't you send him in instead of keeping him waiting?" Hermione called after his retreating back.

"He seemed happy enough; he started polishing my desk, so who was I to stop him? Go on through, she'll see you now."

Hermione had the feeling that she had never met the elf before, yet he was somehow familiar. He pattered to a halt in front of her desk and peered up at her from beneath tufted grey eyebrows.

"How may I help you?" Hermione enquired. The elf was wearing a clean white sheet, toga-fashion and little leather sandals.

"Tha'd best not," he growled.

"Pardon?"

"Elfs that tha'd 'elp soon ends oop 'omeless, tha knows, right in t' shit."

Hermione took a moment to translate this.

"I only give clothes to elves who want them," she declared.

He folded his arms. "Nowt t' do wi' me what tha does, 'oman, as long as tha dun't give 'em t' ma elfs, like; way oop, lass."

"Nobody actually says 'tha knows' or 'way oop, lass', at least not within three sentences," Hermione declared.

The elf sniggered. "'E said tha weren't stupid," he muttered as if to himself, but his bulbous eyes gleamed with amusement. "The boss says 'e got t' come t' see thee... yes, all right, my master says he'll Floo here tomorrow at nine to speak to you about the betrothal of your daughter and Scorpius Malfoy."

"Hold on; are you a Malfoy elf?"

The elf drew himself up to his full three feet in height. "I am not! I associate with half-wits and dullards as seldom as possible, thank you very much. I am, like my master, the last of an impoverished but highly educated and once-noble northern English line, to wit, an elf of impeccable lineage who, having fallen upon hard times, is now making the best of a bad job and working for the estate of 'Château Bonfoi Elf-made Wines'. Not that we have an actual Château, mind you, but that's what happens when you employ advertising agencies."

"You're in the background of the posters! Just behind Scorpius!"

The elf sniffed. "Nice lad, if a tad inclined to preen in front of mirrors, but it's in the breeding, I suppose. He's got a reasonable nose for a wine, I'll say that for him; give him five more years' training, and he'll be a useful pair of hands around the cellars. Right, job done, message acknowledged, the awd bastard'll be here at nine on the dot. Look sharp; don't keep him waiting. He's your arbiter, so you'll want to stay on his good side. If you can find it, of course."

Hermione opened her mouth to ask who the hell his master was, but with a pop, the elf disappeared before she got the first word out.

"Weird or what?" Malcolm called from the other office. "I've never heard an elf so disparaging of its master!"

"Kreacher was," Hermione said, "and he almost got us killed. Damn, haven't I got an appointment at nine?"

"A house-warding at nine-thirty. I'll handle it; you can do some curse-breaking later on to make up for it. You know what I always say: I'll deal with the customer service, you stick with the dangerous stuff, and we'll be fine."

"Thanks. I think."

"Pleasure," he warbled. "Service with a smile! Distinctive Charms Limited: you're distinctive and I'm charming. How about that for an advertising jingle?"

"Malcolm? Shut up."

## Part 2: In Which Hermione Meets an Arbiter.

### Chapter 2 of 5

Twenty-nine years later, Rose Weasley declares her love for Scorpius Malfoy. Molly orders Arthur to have nothing to do with the Malfoys, so Hermione, now widowed, finds herself acting as the head of her family. Naturally, she turns to a book for advice on courting rituals; however, it fails to warn her about jealous Malfoys, the usefulness of owlBay, hungry horses, wizards in cricket whites, interfering elves, perspicacious offspring, the lure of libraries or the life-long loyalty of Crups. She does discover a fondness for elf-made wine and the production thereof, even though 'Château Bonfoi Elf-made Wines' has absolutely nothing to do with Lucius and everything to do with a mysterious arbiter – who is perfectly capable of telling Lucius exactly where he can stick his wand.

*Ye Arbiter ys to make First Contact with ye Heades of ye Families of ye Prospective Betrothed in an Humble & Timely Fashion lykely to inspire alle Happy Feelings betwixt ye Twain; whilst ye Aforementioned Heades shall treat ye Arbiter as a Right Goode Addition to ye Intimate Circle of yr Acquaintances and notte to cast Bookes or Stones or Curses at his Heade on Payne of being Roundly Hexed.*

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At exactly one minute to nine, the Floo in Hermione's office flared green. She looked up from the morning's owl correspondence to see the elf emerging from the hearth.

"Ah, you're punctual, that's a good start," he remarked, flicking a finger to vanish the ash from his toga.

"Did your master really send you through just to check if I was here?"

"Nah, just to check you hadn't bollixed up the Floo by cursing it or anything."

"What, he thought I'd do that, and he forced you to risk your life? Just wait until I get hold of him!"

Hermione realised that the elf was sniggering. The fire flared up, high and green. She turned towards the Floo, her hand on her wand just in case, as a black-robed wizard stepped out.

He moved in the way that experienced Aurors moved, like a man who knew how to defend himself. He had black hair with threads of silver at the temples. It fell loose around his face, and Hermione thought that this is what Professor Snape would look like, if he had lived.

Sometimes it came upon her when she caught sight of a slender dark-haired wizard, a rare, disconnected moment of regret in which she mourned Severus Snape and his pointless death, but the man would always appear wrong in some way: too heavy or too tall or too bland in the features. She waited for this wizard to disappoint her as all the others had done.

He raised his head, and his hair swung back. His nose was uncannily authentic, and his cheekbones, and the black, shrewd gaze that bored into hers, and the smirk that curved his lips. He was faultless, down to the lines around his eyes, the slight loosening of the skin of his jaw and infilling under his cheekbones: the effects upon a once-frazzled wizard of decades of ordinary, healthy, contented life.

She stared at him, all rational thought gone. All the logic and precision that had been her allies through the war fled away, leaving nothing but a vague, unformed fear that this had to be a trick, a cruel, heartless joke played by someone who hated her.

"Ramsbottom, judging by Mrs Weasley's reaction, you clearly failed to inform her of my identity."

His voice convinced her; the pitch, the timbre and most of all, the precise rounding of vowels that came from the renunciation of a flattened northern accent. All were familiar from the Potions dungeon of long ago.

"Oops," Ramsbottom the elf replied without a hint of contrition, "it must have slipped me mind. Silly old me." He gave a smirk worthy of his master and vanished with a sharp crack.

Hermione had successfully raised two magical children and was auntie to a Quidditch team of Weasleys. She recovered her equilibrium pretty fast. Her heart was pounding, and she felt tingly and shaky, but she was proud of the steadiness of her voice when she spoke. "I doubt if I'd have believed him anyway," she said. "How lovely to see you again, Professor Snape."

The tilt of his eyebrow suggested that he did not believe that for a moment, but he let it pass. "It is twenty-nine years since I was last a professor, Mrs Weasley."

"And I've never actually been 'Mrs Weasley', Mr Snape. That's my dear mother-in-law. Officially I'm Mrs Granger-Weasley."

"Of course," Snape said, and the condescension in his voice lit the touch-paper to her anger. It flared up as hot and high as the Floo, taking her by surprise.

"How dare you?" she demanded, leaping to her feet and rounding her desk with her wand in her hand. "How dare you walk into my office without a word of apology or explanation, after three bloody decades?"

She heard Malcolm's gasp, and the swift tap of his approaching footsteps, but nothing fully registered except for the wizard who sneered at her, his wand lifted to oppose hers.

"I owe you nothing," he said coldly.

"I fucking mourned you, Snape!" she snarled, her wand trembling visibly, "I lived with your death weighing on my conscience for all those years, and you couldn't even be arsed to let us know that you were alive!"

Snape folded his arms, his wand dangling from his fingers, as if she was not even worth the effort of fighting. "On the contrary; the Malfoys have always known. I informed Shackbolt and Potter, but I obtained their word that they would not make my survival public. I have no great love for scenes of high emotion."

"Harry knew? And you wouldn't even let him tell me? You utter bastard!"

"Hermione, darling!" Malcolm gasped, rushing to put himself between her and Snape, "No! For Merlin's sake, think what you're saying!" He turned to Snape, his heels together and back straight, and saluted him with his wand. "Professor, headmaster, sir, please forgive my friend, she's overwrought, mother of the bride and all that rot, you know how it is, completely stressed out. Now, do have a seat while I fetch the tea. And it's wonderful to see you again, sir; I'm really glad that the rumours of your death were unfounded."

As he turned back to Hermione, he mouthed "Behave!" then he hurried out, Summoning the best tea service as he went.

Hermione and Snape glared at one another until she remembered what he had come for, and her heart sank. "I apologise for my language, but experience suggests that nothing I can say or do will ever overcome my shortcomings in your eyes. If you no longer wish to act as arbiter, I understand. Will you stay for tea or do you wish to leave immediately?" Too embarrassed to face him, she turned and began straightening the paperwork that had been disturbed by her robes as she had passed her desk.

"Mrs Granger-Weasley, your friend Potter informed me that you were not unduly distressed by witnessing my apparent demise. It did not occur to me that you would be anything other than mildly startled by my reappearance."

Was that almost an apology? Feeling slightly placated, Hermione glanced around at him again.

The first time she had attempted to explain her feelings of guilt about Snape to Ron, he had made fun of her in such an inconsiderate manner that she had never tried again. She had assumed, probably unfairly, that Harry would be equally dismissive. After all, in comparison with Ron and Harry, Voldemort had taken so little from her that she did not feel that she had the right to impose her weight of grief upon them. Harry had lost his parents, his god-father, Remus Lupin and Hedwig. Ron's uncles had died in the first war and his brother in the second. Hermione had not even lost her familiars.

"I watched you die," Hermione said carefully, "I did nothing, despite having a first-aid kit with Dittany in my bag. My failure to help you has haunted my nightmares ever since. I am truly sorry."

Snape stood utterly still, his black robes folded around his body like the furled wings of a crow. His expression was rather less accusatory than she expected.

"Had you said this to me twenty-five years ago, I would have thrown your words back in your face," he told her. "However, with the benefit of hindsight, at such a distance in time, I will point out three things to you: first, I was supposed to be your enemy and had done nothing at that time to disabuse you of the notion; second, it was more important that you supported Potter in his quest to finish the war quickly; and third, you were only eighteen years old. You were expected to get everything right with minimal preparation, training or knowledge. I had scant sympathy for children then, and have acquired little since, but everything depended upon you three teenagers to a degree that was insane, illogical and unfair."

Hermione swallowed past a sudden constriction in her throat. "Have you told Harry that?"

"We had a predictably awkward conversation," Snape said in an off-hand manner that suggested he did not care in the slightest, "in which Potter abased himself and swore to keep my survival a secret in exchange for a collection of memories of his mother. Suffice it to say, for Potter, such precious memorabilia must count for more than the assuaging of your conscience, so do not blame him overmuch."

"Here we are," Malcolm said, levitating the tea tray to the low table beside the fireplace, "tea and biccies. Now are you going to be all right if I go and ward Mr Coggins' cottage, or do I need to act as referee?"

"We'll be fine," Hermione said, noting that Malcolm had broken out his favourites in Snape's honour. Even their most illustrious clients had never merited the Jaffa cakes, Garibaldi biscuits and jammy dodgers that resided in Malcolm's locked filing cabinet.

Snape nodded in acknowledgement and took one of the easy chairs, sweeping his robes aside so that they settled in elegant folds around his legs and feet. Malcolm picked up his notebook and Flooed away, leaving Hermione alone with the man upon whom her daughter's happiness depended to a worrying degree.

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Clearly Snape was prepared to recognise a truce while they poured their tea. Once he had settled back in his seat with a couple of Jaffa cakes (definitely a man who had been out of the country for a while) and a cup of tea adjusted to his liking (two sugars and a splash of milk), Hermione decided upon a pre-emptive strike.

"I've one ultimate objective in these negotiations," she stated, resisting the temptation to betray her nervousness by stirring tea that contained neither milk nor sugar, "and that's my daughter's happiness. I hope not to be made a fool of, reduced to penury or forced to endure anything too horrible in the process."

"Spoken like a true Gryffindor," Snape remarked, taking a delicate bite from the rim of a Jaffa cake.

"Spoken like a Gryffindor who's hoping to lull you into a sense of false security, you mean?"

"There is that. Quite an effective opening shot, madam. In exchange, I point out that Scorpius is my god-son and co-worker. I'm very fond of the lad, now that he has grown out of the underheaded adolescent stage, and his happiness is everyone's main concern."

"I'm prepared to accept that Scorpius' parents are as interested in his happiness as I am in Rose's," Hermione said carefully, "but I already get the impression that his grandfather would cut off his nose to spite his face."

Snape's eyes glittered. "On that, we are in agreement."

"Or at least you'd like me to think that we are."

She startled a brief, sharp crack of laughter from him, and he raised his teacup in her direction. "Lucius tells me that you have been involving yourself in politics over the years, and it shows. What is your latest campaign?"

"Goblins, hags, elves and centaurs don't have the right to bear wands," Hermione told him. "Which is discriminatory. If they want wands, they should be able to buy and use them as legally as witches and wizards."

"Giving a wand to an elf would be the equivalent of giving him clothes."

"Only if they want wands, Mr Snape. No one is forcing them to take them."

"I believe that you were all for forcing clothes upon elves at one stage."

She controlled an urge to roll her eyes to the ceiling. "I was an idealistic teenager at the time. Luckily, the Wizengamot refrained from implementing everything that Harry, Ron or I asked for immediately after the war. Once I'd spoken to a number of elves and their owners, I realised that what I thought was best for people wasn't necessarily what they wanted or needed."

"A revelation that has yet to strike your mother-in-law, I gather."

Hermione sighed. "Well, yes; that's why you're talking to me and not to Arthur Weasley. Molly refuses to let him act as Rose's head of family."

"So she believes that opposing the match is the best way to go?"

"Exactly. Of course, in the face of her outright hostility, Rose is going to be even more determined to have Scorpius. The most frustrating thing is that Rose was rarely defiant as a child or teen. Molly forced her into this position."

"Are the rest of the Weasleys lining up behind their matriarch?"

Hermione shook her head. "Definitely not. Rose's cousins all went to school with Scorpius. Albus Potter and Scorpius were best friends in their Slytherin days and still meet up very regularly. Harry and Ginny like Scorpius very much. Teddy, Victoire, George and Angelina usually side with Ginny and Harry in any family arguments. Charlie, Bill and Fleur think for themselves, so I've no worries about them. Percy's wife Audrey was a Ravenclaw with a Slytherin mother, and she doesn't bear any grudges. The only one who's just as indignant as Molly is Percy himself."

"Predictable," Snape muttered.

"That's only because he feels a need to be loyal to Ron's memory."

"Which you don't?"

Hermione flinched. "Not in this case, no. We never saw eye to eye on the subject of the Malfoys. Ron hated it when I worked with Narcissa and Astoria on the Knockturn Alley regeneration committee."

"But you did anyway," Snape observed, failing to hide his smirk behind his teacup.

Hermione shrugged and sipped her tea. "I refuse to give up on my principles simply because of other people's hang-ups and prejudices."

"You do realise that Lucius intends to adhere to the most exacting of formal pure-blood customs?"

"Of course he does."

"And what do your principles direct you to do in response?"

"I don't intend to embarrass my daughter or the very loyal, intelligent and honourable young man who wants to become my son-in-law."

Snape gazed at her as he finished his tea until she began to feel a little like a specimen on display. Then he stood up and inclined his head a fraction towards her. "Mrs Granger-Weasley, as Lucius' friend, I ought to warn him that he may have bitten off more than he can chew."

His lips curved into the cold, ruthless smile that she remembered well. "But I am sure that I will derive far more entertainment from not doing so. We will be in touch shortly. Good day to you." He seized a handful of Floo powder, threw it into the grate and stepped through, declaring "Malfoy Manor" as the flames leaped high.

Hermione poured herself another cup of tea and ate the last of the Jaffa cakes, dental caries be damned.

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*Ye First Gifte shall be a Token yt doth indicate ye Intentione to courte. Maketh it smalle to middling in Worthe & of a Nature yt is Nice & Acceptable to ye Faire Sexe; thus a Booke, a Trinkyt or other sych Trifle. If ye Maiden is accepting of ye Suite, then shall she reciprocate in Kynde with sum Gifte of Equivalence. If she doth reject ye Gifte then ye Discourse is at an Ende. If ye Suite be an Insulte then may she hexe ye Upstarte (butt notte in ye Pryvates) notte more Tymes than be Acceptable to ye Arbiter. Ye Insul tyd Familie may holden ye Feude of Bludde unto ye Thirde Generation ys it behooveth Alle to be circumspekte & to speke fayre.*

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"Scorpius and I are no longer allowed to meet except in the presence of one of the heads of our families, or two chaperones," Rose said irritably. "Have you ever heard such a load of twaddle in your life?"

"I'm definitely going out with half-bloods and Muggle-born girls only," her brother said. "I'll insist on checking their family tree before the first date. On second thoughts, I've a better idea: I won't get married at all."

"I don't quite see you as a hermit," Hermione remarked.

Rose chuckled. "You're going to live in sin, are you?"

"Might as well. Granny's disowned you for doing things properly, so what's the point of going through all the stress of getting married? I'm sure Mum wouldn't renounce me."

"I don't think Granny Molly has thought this through very well," Hermione said. "Open the window, please, Hugo; there's an owl waiting."

Hugo reached for his wand and waved it, causing the latch on the kitchen window to click open. A huge bird shouldered its way through, glowered at Hugo and held out a package to Rose.

As Hermione watched her daughter reach out to the eagle owl, she realised that her children had never lived through a time when it was necessary to check for curses and hexes in their post.

"Isn't that a Malfoy owl?" Hugo asked curiously as the owl flew off, disdaining the proffered owl treat.

"It isn't Scorpius' Terpsichore, I know her. This is the Malfoy seal, though." Rose picked off the sealing wax and untied the cord so that she could remove the outer wrapping. "It's from Draco! According to this, he's sending it on Scorpius' behalf. Oh Mum, it must be the first of the courting gifts!"

Rose wriggled in her seat, staring down at the flat, leather-covered box on the table.

Hugo pretended not to be caught up in his sister's excitement. Hermione crossed her fingers behind her back as Rose carefully pressed the little catch and lifted the lid on the box.

"Oh, it's beautiful!" Rose breathed.

Scorpius probably had some input in the choice of gift, since he must realise that neither Rose nor Hermione would be impressed by an ostentatious display of diamonds. The necklace and matching earrings were so delicately wrought that they had to be goblin-made. They glistened with pearls.

"Are they silver?" Hugo asked, and Hermione shook her head.

"White gold, or possibly platinum."

"The book said the first gift was supposed to be a 'trinket', didn't it?"

"I expect Lucius thinks this is a trinket," Rose said.

Hermione knew better, but did not spoil Rose's pleasure by saying so.

"So are you going to accept it?" Hugo enquired, cutting to the heart of the matter.

"Yes, of course I am! I'd have accepted whatever he sent, even if it was his old school scarf wrapped in a copy of *The Quibbler*!"

"Right, then, we need to find an equivalent gift to send in return," Hermione said.

"I'd like to see old Scorp wearing a necklace and earrings."

"Ha ha."

"What's Scorp's favourite hobby?" Hermione asked. "Wine? Quidditch? Chess? Breeding peacocks?"

Rose smiled mistily. "Definitely his Dad's racing Granians. He's always talking about them, and he takes me to see them every time we visit the manor. They let me ride one of the mares, and she's absolutely beautiful."

"Oh, great, yeah, let's buy him a flying horse."

"Don't be an unhelpful little brother!" Hermione told him. "Hie thee to the PC and have a look on owlBay for books on racing Granians, the older and rarer the better."

"Surely he'll already have everything worth getting?" Rose asked.

Hermione and Hugo shared a smile.

"The Malfoys don't have a computer, don't understand owlBay and definitely don't know what you can buy online from Europe or America!" Hugo jumped to his feet. "I'm on it!"

Hermione wondered if her burst of optimism was misplaced.

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*'An Historical List of all Horse-Matches Flown*

*And of all Plates and Prizes flown for in England (of the Value of Ten Galleons or upwards) between 1700 and 1740*

*Containing the Names and Owners of the Horses that have flown as above, and the Names and Colours of the Horses also; with the Winner distinguished of every Match, Plate, Prize, or Stakes: the Conditions of Flying, as to Weight, Age, Size, etc. and the Places in which the losing Horses have come in; with a list also of the Principal Cock-Matches of the Years above, and who were the Winners and Losers of them.'*

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"Wow," Scorp breathed, gently tracing the title of the fragile old book. "Where on earth did Rose find this?"

"Or this?" Draco said, lifting the second book from its wrapping. "'The Authentic Granian Horse and his Descendants' by Pellucida Devyce." This is a classic; I've been searching for a decent copy for years!"

"That's mine, thank you, Dad!"

Lucius, watching from the opposite side of the breakfast room, controlled his need to pout. He had been overtaken at the very first hurdle. That wretched Granger-Weasley woman had probably paid one percent of the amount Lucius had spent on jewellery, but had succeeded in finding not one, but two very rare books about the only sport that both Draco and Scorp truly cared for. He needed to try harder.

Lucius went off to the library to search Eponyma de Mallfoye's Grimoire for inspiration.

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*Ye Announcemente of ye Betrothal shall notte be made in sych fashion as to overwelme yse present butt enableth ym to heare ye Goode Tydings in a Merrie & Genteel Manner; to wit, with mickle Goode Taste & Refinement.*

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"Since Scorp is determined to have the young witch," Lucius said to his son, "and she is apparently cognisant of the honour that he is bestowing, the next step is the announcement of the betrothal. Oh, do stop smirking, Draco!"

"I'll take out an ad in the *Prophet*, shall I?" Draco asked as his wife's Kneazle kitten attempted to paw his quill out of his hand. "Persephone, stop it or I'll shut you outside."

"Certainly not!" Lucius snapped. "Malfoys do these things properly! No, we'll throw a grand ball to celebrate the happy event."

"Really?" Draco turned in his seat to stare at his father. Persephone took the opportunity to seize his quill and scampered away with it clamped between her jaws. An elf gave a squeal of alarm on seeing the trail of ink-spots and set off in pursuit of the errant feline. "Here, Father?"

"Where else?"

"There hasn't been a formal ball here since I was very young," Draco mused. "I'm surprised, that's all."

Lucius drew himself up to his full, impressive height and twirled his cane. "Then it is about time we had one, is it not? Kindly ask Astoria if she and her sister are interested in making the domestic arrangements, or whether she would prefer me to enquire of your Aunt Andromeda."

"Knowing Astoria and Daphne, they'll love every minute of it, but I'll check with them."

"Good. I shall draw up a provisional guest list and speak with Dworkin." He turned and strode out, calling for his head elf.

Draco shook his head, Summoned a new quill and returned to the Château Bonfoi accounts.

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Hermione had barely hung up her cloak when the tinkling of the doorbell charm alerted her to someone at the front of the cottage. Rather to her surprise, Snape stood upon the doorstep, looking as out of place against the hollyhocks as a vulture in a supermarket. He was holding a scroll that dripped with ribbons and wax seals.

"This is your family's invitation to the grand ball that Lucius is throwing to announce the betrothal of his grandson to your daughter," he said, in the nature of one making a formal declaration. There was just the faintest hint of amusement in his tone.

"Oh," Hermione said, slightly flummoxed. "Thank you. I expected to hear from him by owl."

"I pre-empted the owl for a reason, Mrs Granger-Weasley."

"Really? Do come in, Mr Snape."

Hermione was acutely aware that the small cottage was in its usual state of chaos. Hugo had left his broom and broom-maintenance kit in the hall. Rose's Arithmancy calculations pertaining to the Malfoy/Granger-Weasley future alliance covered the dining table. The now-elderly Crup, who had filled the void in Hermione's life when Crookshanks died, demanded a bed and water bowl in every room so that he did not have to hobble very far. Hermione's latest attempts to convince the Wizengamot to allow centaurs to obtain wands had resulted in tottering piles of law books on all the armchairs. She bit her lip to prevent herself from apologising like an errant schoolgirl and tried to ignore the sardonic glint in Snape's black eyes.

The Crup heaved himself to his feet and gave the asthmatic grunt that now passed for his bark.

"It's all right, Biggles, he's a wizard and a friend. I was about to make a cup of tea; would you like one, Mr Snape?"

"I did not intend to interrupt your family's evening."

"You haven't. Rose has gone out with her cousins for young Molly's birthday celebration, and Hugo's on duty at St Mungo's tonight, so I'm on my own."

"In that case, tea would be welcome, thank you."

Hermione filled the kettle and let Biggles out into the back garden.

"Is the ball to be held at Malfoy Manor?"

"Of course," Snape said, watching the Crup totter across the lawn to cock his leg on a clump of geraniums. "Do you give him potions for his arthritis?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it's simply the march of time. I got him from the Hogsmeade branch of the Crup and Kneazle Rescue. His previous owner had died, so I don't know how old he was, but he must be at least twenty-five. My neighbour lets him out at mid-day and gives him his lunch and his potion."

Aware that she was starting to prattle, Hermione concentrated on brewing two mugs of tea. "You said that you had a reason for bringing the invitation, Mr Snape?"

"Indeed." He placed the scroll precisely in a small bare space upon the oak dresser, lining it up with the tea caddy and a tin of *Samuel Smegg's Superior Crup Cuisine with Ground Dragon Claw for Added Vitality!* "I presume that your son will escort you to the ball?"

Something in his tone, belying the nonchalant nature of his words, made Hermione pause for a moment before replying. "I'm sure Hugo will want to impress his latest girlfriend by inviting her."

"In which case, if you have no prospective escort, may I have the pleasure of accompanying you?"

Hermione simply gaped at him; she could not help it. Only when spots of colour appeared high on his cheeks did she realise that he assumed that she was about to refuse.

"Of course, thank you, yes," she said, as flustered as she had been when Viktor Krum had invited her to the Yule ball, all those years ago. "You took me completely by surprise. I thought you didn't want anyone to know that you're back in Britain or that you're alive at all?"

"Lucius has persuaded me to emerge from obscurity," he muttered, appearing mildly embarrassed. "Or did you assume that I invariably lurk in the background in order to take house points from canoodling couples?"

She laughed and handed him a china mug bearing the legend 'Quidditch Players do it with enchanted balls', and a cartoon of a wizard hanging from a broom with one hand and flailing at a bludger.

"I don't quite know what I assumed, to be honest. It'll be very helpful to have someone to steer me through all those awkward pure-blood rituals, but I thought you're supposed to remain aloof and impartial?"

He shrugged and sipped his tea. "What makes you think that I am not?"

"Is Lucius trying to set you up with someone?" she asked.

"Very good, Mrs Granger-Weasley; take a house point."

"Please," she said, laughing, "call me Hermione!"

He slanted a black eyebrow at her above the ridiculous mug. "What was that about remaining impartial?"

"So you refer to Lucius, Draco and Scorpius as 'Mr Malfoy' in that case?"

He saluted her with his tea. "Of course not, Hermione. Very well, please feel free to call me 'sir'." His lips curved at her amused snigger. "Or 'Severus', of course, but please, not 'Sev'."

"On condition that you never call me 'Hermie', 'Herms' or, Merlin help you, 'Mione'." Giving an exaggerated shudder, she continued, "Well, I had better compose my reply to dear Lucius and find out what I am supposed to do in response to this blasted ball."

"Avoid one-upmanship at all costs," Snape said seriously. "Lucius is prepared to throw money at this until the cows come home. Despite losing a proportion of his assets after the war, he is still a very rich man."

"Thank you, I'll bear that in mind."

He nodded, placed the empty mug on the draining board and gave her a little bow before stepping outside the back door and Apparating away.

## Part 3: In Which Hermione Attends a Ball.

*Chapter 3 of 5*

Twenty-nine years later, Rose Weasley declares her love for Scorpius Malfoy. Molly orders Arthur to have nothing to do with the Malfoys, so Hermione, now widowed, finds herself acting as the head of her family. Naturally, she turns to a

book for advice on courting rituals; however, it fails to warn her about jealous Malfoys, the usefulness of owlBays, hungry horses, wizards in cricket whites, interfering elves, perspicacious offspring, the lure of libraries or the life-long loyalty of Crups. She does discover a fondness for elf-made wine and the production thereof, even though 'Château Bonfoi Elf-made Wines' has absolutely nothing to do with Lucius and everything to do with a mysterious arbiter – who is perfectly capable of telling Lucius exactly where he can stick his wand.

*Too mych Exytemente doth result in an Imbalance of Humours whych is to be avoyded at Alle Costs by ye Gentlewytch. Bludde-lettynge doth alevyate Certain Hysterical Conditions as do Cold Bathes, Drenchyng & Poultices applied to ye Vital Partes.*

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"Oh, hell," Hermione groaned, digging her fingers into the mass of her hair and tugging lightly. The double bed was covered with an assortment of robes, Muggle dresses, skirts, blouses and cloaks.

"What about your formal robes?" Audrey asked the voice of reason, as usual. "Can you update them with new buttons or something?"

"The red silk ones are over twenty years old and look it, and the gold velvet ones have a stain around the hem that has never come out despite banishing till I was blue in the face. The black ones are for funerals, and if I change their colour, chances are they'll never turn back properly. They're far too plain anyway. No, I need new clothes, damn it."

"How about a Muggle ball-gown?" Rose asked.

"All ze rage wiz ze witches in Paris," Fleur said cheerfully. "You'll be in ze height of fashion, Hermione."

"But I'm not supposed to be; this is Rose's night!"

Rose shook her head, so that her long, dark-auburn hair flew brightly around her face. "No, I'm going to be all demure and virginal in pastel, hiding behind my fan and cooing, 'Fie, sir, we haven't been introduced!' This isn't the wedding; you're allowed to be as dazzling as you like, Mum. Anyway, you mustn't let your enigmatic escort down."

"Escort?" Fleur asked.

"Just someone the Malfoys appointed as arbiter. It's convenient for us to go together saves either of us worrying about finding a partner."

"Mum's got a date, and she won't tell us," Rose stage-whispered to her aunts. "Very mysterious! I can't wait to meet him."

Audrey and Fleur exchanged significant looks while Hermione hid her smile. No doubt Molly and Arthur would be burning with curiosity by tomorrow. Since Molly was making a point of not speaking to either Rose or Hermione, she could continue to burn until the ball. Currently, George was taking bets on whether Molly and Arthur would actually attend. Lucius had competition there in the cutting-off-noses-to-spite-faces stakes, although Hermione suspected that even Molly occasionally conceded that discretion was the better part of valour.

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*Rules to be observed by ye Personnes of Goode Standyng upon attending a Greate Balle sych as of Betrothal & other Celebratory Tymes.*

*I. No spittyng, fartyng, pickyng of ye Nose or Lewd Behavuyour on Payne of a Fyne of VI Knuts*

*II. No hexyng, cursyng or damage to ye Personnes, Elfes, Famylyars, Properties or Accoutrements on Payne of a Fyne of XI Sickyls*

*III. Ye Fayre Maiden Wytches shall behave in a Manner yt is Delycate, Nice & befitting yr Tender Yeares. Alle Maides to weare yr Haire free & unbound as confirms yr Status.*

*IV. Ye Gentlewizards shall behave in a Manner yt is Gallante & shall entertayne with Gentil Amusements.*

*V. Ye Matrons, Beldames & Wyves shall ensure ye Goode Conduct of alle & shall weare yr Haire duly confined & bound & shall notte engage in any Nafaryous Doings. On sych do ye Virgin Honoure of ye Maides depend.*

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"I'll get it!" Rose yelled as the door-charm tinkled. Hugo had already left to collect his girl-friend-of-the-week, delivering Biggles to their elderly neighbour on his way out. Hermione pulled on her shoes why, oh, why had she let Fleur persuade her to buy such high heels? and hurried out of the bathroom to the top of the stairs.

"Good evening, Miss Weasley," Snape's smooth baritone was unmistakable.

"Can I help you?" Rose enquired politely, although she must have realised that this was their escort to the ball.

"Severus Snape at your service," he said.

Hermione heard Rose catch her breath in a little gasp. "Snape? Are you *the* Severus Snape?"

"As far as I am aware, there is only the one."

"The 'Severus' my cousin Al's named for? Really? I thought you were dead!" Rose gave a little huff of laughter. "I'm sorry; what a daft thing to say! Only I've heard so much about you."

"How unfortunate for you."

"Oh, no," she said seriously, "Uncle Harry, Auntie Ginny and Mum always say you're their hero. Please, come in and don't mind the mess. Mum'll be down in a moment."

Hermione paused, wondering if this polite, formal wizard was the same man who had flayed her with his sarcasm when she was a child, or if he had matured in the intervening years as much as she had.

"Mum says that Mr Malfoy asked you to be the arbiter for my betrothal. Do you know the Malfoys very well?"

"Scorpius is my god-son."

"Oh," Rose said faintly, "I didn't know that."

"I requested that the Malfoys told no one; however, the irresistible combination of your mother and Lucius Malfoy has lured me out of obscurity."

"My mother and Scorpius' grandfather? That's the most incendiary mixture I've ever heard of!"

"Hardly, Miss Weasley. That would be your grandparents and Lucius Malfoy."

"Oh, god, yes!" Rose groaned. "I dread to think what will happen when Scorpius and I start a family. Wizarding War three at the least."

"No, Miss Weasley," Snape said in a low, chilly voice, "I do not think so."

Hermione gasped and grabbed at the banister, her wand flying to her free hand at her subconscious bidding. Then she paused as Rose spoke. Rose might have inherited a little of her father's speak-first-and-think-afterwards approach to life, but she was no longer a child.

"I'm sorry, Professor Snape," Rose said quietly. "That was a very tactless thing for me to say."

Snape allowed the silence to stretch on for an uncomfortable length of time before he replied. "Apology accepted. I am no longer anyone's professor, thank Merlin, and I would prefer you to call me 'Mr Snape'."

"Of course," Rose whispered.

Hermione descended the stairs, stowing her wand up her sleeve and smiling brightly at her daughter. "Good evening, Mr Snape. I see you've met Rose. Are we ready?"

She turned to Snape and almost tripped over her heels. He was wearing a magnificent set of bottle green velvet robes, embroidered at the cuffs and high collar with silver and green. His hair was held back, and as he moved towards the door, she could see that the clip was formed of intertwined silver snakes with glittering emerald eyes. The silver streaks stood out in his black hair, enhancing his air of dignity. It was easy to believe that this wizard had been the headmaster of Hogwarts.

"Mrs Granger-Weasley," he said, and she realised that he was examining her formal gown out of the corner of his eye.

"I hope that we meet with your approval, sir," she said demurely.

He held open the front door and bowed slightly. "Fishing for compliments already, Mrs Granger-Weasley?"

"You are our arbiter," Hermione said, locking the door and raising the wards. "I was asking your professional opinion."

"In that case," Snape said, "Miss Weasley, you have struck an excellent balance between youthful charm and the required ladylike reserve. I salute your choice."

With Fleur's assistance, Rose had selected a plain but very well cut robe against which to display the pearl necklace and ear rings. Her long dark auburn hair shone like flame on the apple-green silk. Her cheeks dimpled, and she dropped him the formal curtsy that she had been practising for days. She and Hermione had very quickly discovered how difficult that was in high heels. Snape's eyes narrowed as he turned to Hermione. He extended a hand and touched one of the curls that cascaded over her shoulders. "However, you, Madam, have as usual flouted convention, and wear your hair loose as if you were still a 'fayre maiden'."

"I may be a 'matron' but I'm no longer a 'wyve' Mr Snape," Hermione said, tossing her hair behind her back and trusting to Sleekeazy's latest technology to prevent the curls from unravelling into a mass of frizz, "I'm a widow, and being below the age of eighty, not yet a 'Beldame' and thus technically an eligible witch, I'm entitled to wear my hair as I wish. Or am I being a forward hussy in Lucius' book?"

Snape did not crack a smile, but something glinted in the depths of his eyes. "Technically, you are indeed correct, although it depends upon which of Lucius' books you peruse."

"I doubt if I'll get to peruse any of Lucius' books," Hermione said, trying to sound as if the very mention of Lucius' famous library was of zero concern to her. She had schooled herself into simply expressing mild interest every time Rose told her of the rare old volumes in the Manor's collection.

"Ah," Snape said, holding out his arm, "but you will soon be related, will you not? I'm sure that with a little judiciously applied flattery, Lucius could be convinced to flaunt his assets before you."

Rose sniggered and muttered, "I bet he would."

"Rosie, do behave! We're about to enter polite pure-blood society," Hermione told her, firmly quelling her own nervous giggle.

"Just remember," Snape said, his deep, melodic voice very suited to formal pronouncements, "that only one in ten of the witches and wizards present tonight will be thoroughly versed in the old observances, so any minor infringements will go mostly unnoticed. Greater transgressions will be put down to your being a Muggle-born and any major infraction forgiven in a hero of the war anyway. Kindly hold on while I Apparate us through the wards."

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Hermione shook out the creases from her skirt, patted her hair to check that Sleekeazy was living up to its promise, and pasted her public smile onto her face. The limestone of Malfoy Manor glowed in the light of the setting sun. Coloured lanterns lit the approaches to the front door, and a multitude of candles gleamed in every window. An elf in a smart monogrammed tea-towel bowed to the guests, directing them to elves waiting to accept their travelling cloaks.

"You haven't been here before, have you, Mum?" Rose asked brightly, peering around at the gorgeously clad witches and wizards streaming towards the door.

"Not since the war," Hermione said.

Rose was too excited and too eager to catch sight of her fiancé to notice her mother's introspection.

Snape told her quietly, "The house has been extensively remodelled since those dark days."

A little of her tension eased as she realised that he was correct. She recognised neither the wide, oak-panelled hall nor the elegant pastel walls of the inner rooms.

Lucius, Draco, Astoria and Scorpius had lined up to greet their guests upon arrival, like characters in one of the old pre-war films that Hermione's mother had always laughed at, but secretly enjoyed.

"Hello, Mrs Malfoy, Mr Malfoy, Mr Malfoy, Scorpius," Rose said, beaming as Scorpius stepped out of line, took her hand and kissed it.

"So good of you to come," Astoria trilled.

"Would have been a complete waste of time if they hadn't," Snape pointed out.

Astoria clicked her tongue and gave him an admonitory little tap on the arm. "Severus, you're a wicked man! What a charming gown, Mrs Granger-Weasley. Rose, my dear, you look delightful. Good evening, Mrs Glendenning. Mr Glendenning, so lovely to see you again..."

"Mrs Granger-Weasley," Scorpius said, turning from Rose to bow over Hermione's hand and touch his lips to her knuckles.

She was glad that Fleur had cast manicuring charms on her fingernails.

"Thanks for being such a good sport about all this."

"You're welcome," Hermione said, and he gave his irrepressible little grin.

"See you later," he mouthed at Rose as Mr and Mrs Glendenning shook his hand and began congratulating him. "First dance is mine!"

Draco gave Hermione a cool smile, glanced at her loose hair, raised a perfect blond eyebrow, but merely said her name in a slightly bored voice. Hermione responded by looking pointedly at his receding hairline and mirroring the smile.

Lucius gazed down his nose at her and languidly held out a hand. "Splendid," he said, without making it clear what he was talking about.

"Likewise," Hermione replied. The grey eyes gained a little more animation as he looked her up and down. Hermione felt an impulse of pure mischief, and lifted her skirts in both hands to execute a perfect curtsy. "I do hope that we pass muster, Mr Malfoy, for if we don't, I fear that there is little we can do about it now."

"Indeed," he murmured, "but is this really a game that you wish to play?"

"Slytherins will bend the rules until they creak in protest," Snape said.

Hermione raised her chin. "Of course, but Gryffindors play to win."

Snape snorted, and Lucius gave him a look that combined fondness with exasperation. "How could I have forgotten?" he purred.

Snape touched Hermione's elbow to steer her on as the queue began building up behind them.

"Nicely played," Snape said as they strolled towards a distant door. Around them, Hermione could hear voices whispering, the susurrations of Snape's name carrying over the sounds of distant music and laughter.

"Snape? Is that Severus Snape?"

"I thought he'd died a long time ago!"

"It's Severus Snape!"

She realised that her anxiety must be nothing to his. She tightened her grasp upon his arm and looked around for Ginny and Harry.

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The original Golden Trio had readily opened to embrace Ginny Weasley. As the love of Harry's life, as well as being Ron's little sister and Hermione's first real female friend, she had known them all so well. The changes brought about by careers, children and other interests had not diminished their close relationship. Ron's death had inevitably forged a new equilibrium among the remaining three. They gravitated towards each other at public events, and even the press were prepared to allow them their privacy. Photographs invariably bore captions suggesting that they were musing over the events of the war, or comforting each other at yet another reminder of their terrible loss.

Harry's expression, upon seeing Hermione approaching arm in arm with Snape, was a mixture of surprise, pleasure and guilt. Ginny simply looked like a landed fish a beautiful red-haired fish perhaps, but totally stunned.

"My God! Are you real?" Ginny blurted once she found her voice.

"As I ever was, Mrs Potter."

Ginny looked from Snape to Harry and smacked her husband hard on the arm. "You knew!"

"Ouch! Yeah," Harry said, rubbing his bicep, "I made a promise. Sorry. I wanted to tell you, but I'd already betrayed enough of his secrets. I couldn't betray any more. It was *Snape*, I couldn't do that to him again."

Hermione realised that the apology was directed at her as well. She nodded in understanding. "It's all right, Harry, I'd have done the same."

Snape took a step backwards. "I shall leave the heroes to their reminiscences."

Without a second thought, Hermione reached out to his sleeve and realised that both Harry and Ginny had done exactly the same.

"You're as much a hero as any of us," Ginny said with a kind of fierce possessiveness.

"At least wait until the novelty's worn off," Harry muttered, tilting his head to indicate the crowd of interested onlookers.

"Do I look as if I need either your endorsement or your protection, Mr Potter?"

Harry blinked at him. "What? It's entirely up to you, sir, but the vultures hold off for longer if we stand together and look serious. It's what we usually do. We make rude comments about the fashions or play 'I Spy', but they all think we're having deeply intellectual conversations about the war."

Snape's lips curved in a sneer. "Of course, what else would one expect of the Chosen Chief Auror?"

Harry shrugged, with his hands in his robe pockets, displaying just a hint of the scruffy little boy whom Hermione remembered so well. "I can converse articulately about our wartime exploits if you prefer. Whoops, brace yourself, sir: here comes Auntie Min."

Minerva McGonagall, retired headmistress, walked with a stick and leaned on the arm of her old friend, Pomona Sprout, also retired. They stopped and stared. Minerva had gone quite pale. Hermione belatedly thought that she should have asked Snape's permission to give advance warning to his elderly ex-colleagues, but they were tough old witches. Minerva shrugged aside Professor Sprout's support and advanced until she and Snape were only a few feet apart.

"I could hex you to within an inch of your life!" she snapped. "Och, lad, *knew* you had to have survived, but you could have had the decency to get in touch!"

"I have only recently attained a state of mind that allowed me to return, Minerva," he told her gravely. "I didn't expect anyone to be particularly concerned or distressed by my death. I apologise if I was mistaken. May I also point out that I am too many decades away from being a 'lad'?"

"Oh, Severus!" she exclaimed and threw her arms around him. Snape looked totally taken aback for a moment before his customary sneer reasserted itself.

"Be careful, people will get the wrong idea if you go around embracing Slytherins."

"Severus, you're a twit! Not to mention a very brave man and a fine actor. I'm proud to have known you." She wiped her eyes and stepped back, allowing Pomona Sprout to take her place. Professor Sprout hugged Snape with equal enthusiasm.

"A good start," Harry muttered.

"Determined to rehabilitate him, whatever he has to say about it?" Hermione asked out of the corner of her mouth.

"Absolutely." Harry waved to Kingsley Shacklebolt.

The ex-Minister greeted Snape with rather less surprise and introduced him to his wife and daughters. After that came a stream of Slytherins congratulating their hero on his return. Hermione noted that they were considerably less demonstrative than the Gryffindors, but their pleasure seemed genuine enough.

A group of witches and wizards in matching robes began arranging musical instruments at one end of the largest room. Snape turned to Hermione and held out his hand. "May I have the pleasure of the first dance, Mrs Granger-Weasley?"

"Certainly, Mr Snape."

Hermione had become accustomed to the old-fashioned formality of Wizarding society over the years, but she still felt like a character from a Jane Austen novel. She glimpsed Hugo with a wide-eyed girl, her rather revealing cocktail dress suggesting that her son was sticking to his declared intent of going out with Muggle-borns. Scorpius, impeccable as always, led out Rose, followed by Draco and Astoria, and then almost all the guests spilled onto the floor for the first waltz.

Snape leaned close to murmur against Hermione's hair. "I fear that I have put Lucius' nose out of joint. He clearly intended to ask you for the first dance."

Sure enough, Lucius Malfoy was watching with a discontented expression. He turned away as soon as Hermione caught his eye.

"Does that mean I have to dance with him?"

"Of course, since he's the host and you're Rose's mother. Tradition dictates that he should ask you, even if you were accompanied by a partner or spouse. He's an excellent dancer; you needn't fear for your toes."

Snape was pretty adept himself: Hermione had no problem following him even in her high heels.

"I suppose I should get it over with in that case. Will you come and rescue me later on?"

"Story of my life," he said and she laughed, and his answering smile, small and private and slightly wry, made something unfamiliar flutter inside her chest.

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Bill and Fleur attended the ball. George and Angelina accompanied Audrey, who made an excuse about Percy having to work late, which no one believed. The younger Weasleys and Potters turned up en masse to support Rose and Scorpius.

Hermione found herself enveloped in a hug by a wildly excited Malcolm. "Have you seen that?" he groaned, indicating the three Malfoy males, standing together for a moment as an elf refilled their wine-glasses. "They breed true, don't they? Gorgeous!"

"Straight," she said.

"I know, I know, love, don't remind me. Oh, excuse me, I spy another old friend!" He darted away to embrace Pansy Fotheringhay, née Parkinson, who had recently replaced Rita Skeeter as the *Daily Prophet's* society columnist.

Lucius said something to Snape, and then came directly towards Hermione. She raised her chin, willing her heart rate not to speed up. She ought not to be afraid of him; the old snake had had his fangs drawn. He could no longer harm her, but she always felt that he sensed her nervousness and was amused by it.

"May I have the next dance, Mrs Granger-Weasley?"

She nodded, holding out her hand. His fingers were cool and dry. She assumed that dancing with him would be like dancing with Snape, but it wasn't, not quite. Snape was a good dancer: she had felt safe with him, confident that he would not make a fool of her or allow her to make mistakes. Snape made her feel that he knew what he was doing. Lucius Malfoy was superb. He made her feel that *she* knew what she was doing. When she told him so, he inclined his head and gave her a little sidelong look, as if checking that she was not making fun of him. She realised that he was only a man, not a monster, and that he was just a little nervous. She smiled at him then. His pale eyebrows rose in enquiry.

"I was wondering," she said before her nerve failed, "if it would be possible to visit your library?"

"I was wondering when you would ask," he responded, twirling her lightly.

She felt like Ginger Rogers dancing with Fred Astaire. "I'm asking now. May I?"

"I'm sure that something can be arranged."

After he returned her to the table where the Potters were sitting, she flopped down next to Ginny.

"God," she sighed, checking that they could not be easily overheard, "I need to be careful! I could almost get to like him."

Harry laughed and poured her a glass of Château Bonfoi champagne. "I know what you mean." He lifted a shoulder towards the Malfoys, and Hermione realised that Draco was coming in their direction.

"Lovely champagne," Ginny said.

Draco gave a little nod in acknowledgement. "Potter, you owe me a favour."

"I do," Harry admitted after a long pause. "What are you after this time, Malfoy?"

"Tickets for Scorpius and myself."

"The Ashes at Lords?"

"That would be satisfactory."

"I'll ask Dudley to look into it."

Much to Hermione's and Ginny's amusement, when their children were young, Harry's cousin Dudley had introduced them and Harry to the wonders of Test cricket. Albus took Scorpius to a couple of matches, so Draco went along to check out the highly suspicious Muggle activity to which his son was gaining a serious addiction. Since Draco was reluctant to admit that a teenaged boy knew more than he did about anything, he had made an effort to understand the rules of the game and was hooked completely against his better judgement, of course. Whenever England played at home against Australia for the Ashes, they were cheered on by a crowd of assorted Potters and Weasleys, often accompanied by Draco and Scorpius, and Dudley Dursley with his sons.

"An extra ticket wouldn't go amiss," Draco drawled, "if you can manage it."

"Your dad?" Harry asked in astonishment.

Draco sneered. "Don't be dense, Potter; he still finds the whole idea preposterous."

"More likely terrifying," Ginny whispered to Hermione.

"Severus would like to come," Draco said loftily, saluting Harry with his champagne flute.

"England wouldn't dare lose with Snape scowling from the stand," Harry said, grinning. "Are we still on for the Merlin Handicap meeting on Saturday?"

"No, damn it! Witching Hour pulled a muscle in her wing in training, so I had to withdraw her. My trainer won't let her race for at least another two weeks. Scorpius thinks we should retire her and put her to Athromancer, see if we can get a decent foal from her, but we'll see. She isn't quite what I look for in a brood mare, a bit on the fine side."

"But fast," Harry said. "Look at what she's won."

"All short races, Potter; she hasn't the staying power for anything much over fifty furlongs. She's a sprinter, and I prefer horses that're in for the long haul."

Rose and Scorpius appeared while Harry and Draco were still arguing about whether amateur point-to-point race wins were good indicators of a Granian's stamina. Rose glowed with happiness while Scorpius looked endearingly flushed and proud at her side. They seemed so terribly young.

"I note the absence of Molly and Arthur," a deep voice remarked above Hermione's ear. She looked up at Snape's unmistakable profile.

"Yes, they obviously decided that, at their age, formal balls are just too tiring."

"Of course," he murmured, "how unfortunate."

"If you tried hard, you might sound as if you meant that," Ginny said. "We all know why they're not here."

"But only Gryffindors would point it out, Mrs Potter."

"I'm not really that crass, Mr Snape, I just like winding Slytherins up." She beamed at him, and Scorpius laughed.

"Al and I always thought we were getting one over on Mr and Mrs Potter," he told Snape, "it was years before we realised that they were letting us get away with the small stuff to keep us amused and to prevent us trying anything really evil." He turned to Rose. "The Stomping Trolls are playing in five minutes on the terrace; d'you want to come and grab a spot at the front?"

They hurried off, holding hands.

"They don't even know what real evil is," Harry said, looking at Draco. "We've done all right, haven't we?"

"Don't get too complacent, Potter," Draco told him, "Who knows what the next generation might produce? Do excuse me: I believe that my wife requires my input."

He went to confer with Astoria, Daphne and a group of Malfoy elves who had been levitating bottles of wine to the tables.

"They're playing a foxtrot," Ginny said hopefully, at which Harry rolled his eyes and allowed her to drag him off to the dance floor.

"The choice appears to consist of ballroom dancing in here, card games for high stakes in the next room, or cacophonous music outside," Snape said. He sounded bored, but he was watching Hermione out of the corner of his eye. "Lucius wondered if you would care to join us for a glass or two in the library."

"Do you really need to ask?"

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The library was cool and dark after the brightly lit ballroom. Only a candelabrum on the mantelpiece cast a sphere of muted golden light. The fireplace was filled with roses and lilies, their perfume mingling with beeswax furniture polish and the dry, addictive scent of old books. Lucius lounged in a leather armchair with his ankles crossed on the hearthrug, a glass in his hand. He indicated the two chairs opposite.

"You were right, Severus," he remarked, "this is a very pleasant Cabernet Sauvignon. It doesn't have quite the depth of an elf-made wine, of course, but I like the balanced berry and oak flavours with the hint of anise; they can only be improved upon by the elves. Where is it from?"

"California," Snape said.

"Hm, interesting. Is Draco intending to invest in the colonies?"

Snape chuckled as he took his seat. "Don't let the Americans hear you call them that."

Lucius shrugged. "If I was ever to emigrate, I assure you that it would be no further than Italy, so they would never know. Do help yourselves to the wine, or there is a decent port in the decanter, or a cognac if you prefer. Will you plant a vineyard in California, Severus?"

For some reason, Hermione found herself holding her breath and waiting for Snape's response.

"I had considered moving, but if we do invest, we will employ an agent in the states. I doubt if Ramsbottom would approve of America."

"Have you always owned an elf?" Hermione asked, accepting a glass of the deep red wine from Snape. She sank into a chair, her aching feet grateful for the respite as she eased off her shoes.

"I inherited him," Snape said, filling his own glass. "My great-uncle, the last of the Princes, ran a small business importing elf-made wine. He was killed in an attack upon Diagon Alley towards the end of the war. Because Edward Prince died without issue, his elf was left homeless. Ramsbottom made his way to Hogwarts to seek me out. Being of a suspicious nature, he followed me around for a while rather than making his presence known. When Lucius sent me to the Shack on the Dark Lord's orders, the old elf spied upon all of us."

Snape looked at Hermione, and the corners of his mouth lifted into a smirk. "He saw the three of you leave me lying in my blood. He waited until you had gone, then he plugged the wounds, applied the potions from my first aid kit and restarted my heart with a jolt of magic. He tells me that he was undecided what to do with me at first, but Potter's impassioned defence of my character convinced him that I should be fully resuscitated and hidden away from my remaining enemies. He had noted that the Malfoys were distressed upon hearing the news of my death, so he informed them where I was. They ensured that I was nursed back to health."

"You know how much I regretted my naivety," Hermione said softly. "So have you owned Ramsbottom ever since?"

The smirk widened. "I regularly offer him clothes, but he insists upon remaining with me to ensure that I don't become too complacent. He's well-versed in the production, transport, valuation and sale of fine wine, so it made sense to utilise his expertise. Once I had recovered, Draco, Ramsbottom and I all went into business together. Draco's initial investment and business acumen, together with the old elf's experience, and my skill with potions and charms, resulted in 'Château Bonfoi Elf-made Wines' and a fair standard of living for all of us." He raised his glass. "I owe my life to Ramsbottom. He ensures that I never forget it."

Malfoy sipped his wine. "Owing a life debt to an elf has always seemed a rather dicey situation to me," he muttered.

"The precedent is to offer the elf freedom, thus relieving the debt," Hermione said, "but as he doesn't want to accept clothes, there isn't much that Severus can do. Anyway, Ramsbottom was legally owned by Severus at the time, even if Severus didn't know it. Saving his master's life would be no more likely to incur a life debt than if a parent saved their child, or an Auror saved the life of someone whom they were protecting as a part of their job."

"That has always been a matter for some debate," Malfoy said smoothly. "I recall a discussion in the Wizengamot about a similar situation where an Auror was instructed to protect someone but failed in their duty."

"It always seemed strange to me, that a person should be owed a life debt for saving a life, but there's no life debt incurred for killing someone. Shouldn't the family of a murdered person be owed a life debt?" Hermione asked softly. "They ought to be owed a life by the murderer, of course, but would they also be owed a life by the Auror who failed to save them?"

Malfoy shifted in his seat. Hermione heard the silk of his robes rub softly against the leather upholstery. "The elephant in the room," she remarked. She glanced from one wizard to the other. Each raised an eyebrow; the gesture eerily mirrored by a jet black brow and a silvery-blond one. She wondered if Snape had initially copied the affectation from his older friend. "Muggle saying," she explained.

"Mrs Granger-Weasley," Malfoy said stiffly, "my family acknowledges the debt incurred."

What was she supposed to say? Acutely uncomfortable, Hermione shook her head. "There's no debt, Mr Malfoy. My husband failed to save your wife."

"But he gave his own life in the attempt."

"We each lost one of our own. In that, we're equal."

Malfoy inclined his head, his hair falling forward in a sheer, silken curtain to hide his expression.

Hermione was sorry, now, for the unkind things the Weasleys had said about the Malfoys in the first agony of their grief. Intensely protective of her family, Molly blamed the entire House of the Snake for the loss of her two brothers and two sons. The feud between the Malfoys and Weasleys went back generations, and Molly had been raised to regard her husband's enemies as her own. Her grandchildren had attempted to convince her that Scorpius was no more evil than Al, but Molly was having none of it. "Malfoy by name, of bad faith by nature," she said darkly. She considered that Narcissa Malfoy was as much to blame for Ron's death as the wizards who had cursed him, pointing out that Narcissa had known that she was a target and had no need to go out in public. "She could have sent an elf!" Molly protested to anyone who would listen at which stage Hermione beat a hasty retreat before she said something she might regret.

Hermione had mourned Ron, but they had been contented together, rather than happy. She still missed him for his optimism, for the way he had always been able to make her laugh, and for the warmth of his body at her side. He had died doing the job that he loved, and she could regret nothing that had brought her the two children whom she adored.

In her current state of near-inebriation, Hermione could not oppose a marriage that brought her to this library. The books called out all around her with their seductive, parchment-scented magic. She would consider handing over Hugo as well if she could only get her hands on those books. Damn it, as far as she was concerned, Malfoy could have his way with the entire Weasley family!

What she actually said was, "How on earth do you get your hair to do that?"

Snape went into a paroxysm of coughing as a mouthful of Cabernet Sauvignon went down the wrong way. Malfoy spent a few moments conjuring a glass of water and siphoning up the spilt wine before it irreparably stained the carpet.

Once they were settled again, Snape refilled their glasses. "Lucius is no more likely to reveal his hair-care secrets than he is to allow you to access his secret wine cellar."

"You mean the one that my friends don't know about?" Lucius enquired smoothly.

"I mean the one that *Draco* doesn't know about."

Lucius went still for just a second, and then he laughed lightly. "My dear Severus, you're giving away all my secrets."

"A spy needs to keep in practice; one never knows when one's particular talents might be required."

"You can tell me; I'm going to be family," Hermione pointed out.

"So you are," Lucius agreed. Tiny laughter lines appeared at the edges of his eyes and mouth as he smiled, and rather than aging him, they made him appear more human and approachable. "Although, speaking of family, perhaps someone had better go and check up on the younger elements and make sure that nothing untoward is happening out in the shrubbery."

He angled a narrow-eyed look at Snape who did not move. "My days of blasting miscreants out of the rosebushes are long past. You have a platoon of elves, Lucius: send them."

"The task requires a human touch."

"Not mine, it doesn't." Snape's expression was mulish, and Hermione realised, with a little frisson, that he was reluctant to leave her alone with Lucius Malfoy. Surely, he did not mistrust his old friend? Or was he jealous? The frisson grew into quite a tremor at that thought.

"Reluctant as I am to leave without touching a single book," Hermione said, "perhaps we should both go? I'm one of 'ye matrons, beldames and wyves' after all, so I'm responsible for making sure that the little darlings aren't indulging in behaviour unbecoming to innocent maids."

Sure enough, Snape's sullen demeanour immediately cleared. "They could be shagging like bunnies for all I care," he sighed, but he got to his feet. Hermione pulled on her shoes, and he held out a hand to assist her back onto her perilous heels. "Don't you have a charm to keep your balance on those?" he enquired.

Malfoy clicked his tongue. "Severus, Mrs Granger-Weasley is a refreshingly natural creature who doesn't require scaffolding charms to enhance her natural assets."

Hermione wondered how many glasses of Californian red she had actually drunk. The heels felt very high indeed. Snape tucked her hand under his arm.

"Let us go and terrify the canoodling couples out of the bushes. I shall see you later, Lucius." He swept the slightly unsteady Hermione out of the room.

Her last glimpse was of Lucius Malfoy folding his arms and staring after them with narrowed eyes.

## Part 4: In Which Hermione Gets Cross.

Twenty-nine years later, Rose Weasley declares her love for Scorpius Malfoy. Molly orders Arthur to have nothing to do with the Malfoys, so Hermione, now widowed, finds herself acting as the head of her family. Naturally, she turns to a book for advice on courting rituals; however, it fails to warn her about jealous Malfoys, the usefulness of owlBay, hungry horses, wizards in cricket whites, interfering elves, perspicacious offspring, the lure of libraries or the life-long loyalty of Crups. She does discover a fondness for elf-made wine and the production thereof, even though 'Château Bonfoi Elf-made Wines' has absolutely nothing to do with Lucius and everything to do with a mysterious arbiter – who is perfectly capable of telling Lucius exactly where he can stick his wand.

*If thy Wytche possesseth notte a Famylyar, then it doth behoove thee to gift a Famylyar as ye second Bridal Gifte. Be sure thou gifteth a Magickal Beast that be both pleasing & sufficient for ye Purpose.*

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Hermione sipped her coffee as she flicked through the morning paper. The usual photographs of herself, Harry and Ginny were eclipsed by pictures of Snape. There was also a potted biography of the Hero of Slytherin and speculation about where he had been living since the war. Hermione suspected that the reporting of the ball would not have been quite so favourable had Rita Skeeter not handed on her mantle to one of Draco's old school friends. Hermione was not entirely delighted to find a picture of herself and Lucius Malfoy, waltzing across the back page in black and white. The little figures moved together to the inaudible music, his hand played across the back of her close-fitting bodice, his grey eyes fixed upon her face no less intently than those of Scorpius upon Rose in the adjacent photograph.

Feeling unsettled, Hermione tossed the *Sunday Prophet* aside to find herself face-to-beak with a very large owl who had flown in through the open window and was waiting upon the breakfast table. It hooted at her and stuck out a leg with an air of thinly veiled impatience. The owl took off when she had unfastened the scroll. It was addressed to Rose, of course, but for some reason Hermione felt slightly disappointed. Perhaps one day, a wizard would send romantic notes to her. Hermione remembered yearning for the excitement of her adolescent relationship with Viktor Krum until the reliable normality of life with Ron had reasserted its hold upon her, soothing her war-torn nerves, giving her the illusion that everyone she loved was safe and persuading her that she was entirely happy.

By the time Rose wandered down in her dressing gown, looking rumpled and bleary-eyed, Hermione had wrestled her demons into submission. She was able to smile fondly at her daughter. "There's a letter for you from the Malfoys," she said, indicating the scroll upon Rose's plate. Rose's face brightened, and she broke the seal.

"The next gift is a new familiar!" she exclaimed, and then she frowned. "Oh dear, I hope it isn't something that's going to upset Biggles." She indicated the basket in the warm corner next to the kitchen fireplace, narrowing her eyes when she realised that it was empty. "Mum? Where is he?"

"Still next door with Madam Tyler, of course. You know how she spoils him! I expect he's still asleep on her bed."

Rose reached for the coffee pot under its Stay-fresh charm. "Scorpius knows we've got him," she said with a conviction that sounded slightly forced. "I'm sure he wouldn't do anything to put his nose out of joint." To be fair, Scorpius had always made a point of petting the old Crup whenever he visited the cottage.

"I don't think Scorpius has too much say in what's happening at the moment," Hermione said darkly.

They consumed coffee and toast in a pensive silence until Hugo clattered down the stairs, glanced at the picture of Snape on the front page of the newspaper, slathered marmalade on the last slice of toast, and enquired, "Any idea why there's an enormous flying horse tethered in the back garden, Mum? Because it's eating all your bedding plants."

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"This is completely ridiculous," Hermione exclaimed, waving her arms. "We haven't got room to keep a miniature pony, let alone a bloody cart-horse!"

"He's a Granian, Mum!" Rose said in an awed voice.

Unnerved by the winged monster in his territory, Biggles barked furiously from the next-door garden until Madam Tyler shut him inside and offered to look after him for the rest of the day. That gave her as good an excuse as any to come out and lean on the garden fence, smoke her pipe and comment on the antics of her neighbours.

"There's probably something in the deeds against keeping a stallion," she pointed out, not entirely helpfully.

"Is he?" Rose asked, bending down to peer beneath the horse. "So he is. I wonder what his name is."

The horse stamped a hoof, leaving a large print in the lawn, and bit the top off what had been a splendid fuchsia.

To his credit, Severus Snape appeared within ten minutes of Hermione sending her Patronus. There was nothing rumpled or hung-over about him; he looked as razor-sharp as ever in his black robes and white shirt.

"You can't reject any gift outright without rejecting the entire suit," he pointed out.

"I know," Rose sighed. She had bribed the horse with carrots, conjured a rope and tied him up in a corner where he could do no more damage to the flowers, although the lawn looked as if it had been churned up by a tribe of Nifflers. "But he can't stay here." There was a wistful note in her voice nevertheless. As a teenager, Rose had desperately wanted a flying pony, although she more-or-less outgrew the phase once she discovered boys.

"Obviously. I suggest that you dispatch your Patronus to request Draco's advice."

Hermione felt slightly better when she realised that Snape was as reluctant to approach the horse as she was. Perhaps he was reminded of Buckbeak.

Eventually Draco strolled through the front gate, sneered at the cottage and enquired loftily "I gather my presence is required?"

"Yes," Hermione snapped, "it is. You can take a look at your father's latest gift and then come up with helpful suggestions. It's in the back garden. And be warned I've rather gone off Malfoys!"

Draco sauntered through the house, giving the impression of being far too well-bred to comment however much he'd have liked to. He took one look at the horse and burst into astonished laughter.

"Great Merlin!" he exclaimed. "That's Dancing Warlock!"

"What?" Rose had been hand-feeding the horse to prevent it from breaking free and ravaging the garden. She gaped at Draco. "The three-time winner of the Thousand Galleon Stake? Are you kidding?"

"I never 'kid' about horses. That's Warlock. Look at the shape of him, that white blaze and the black mane and wing-tips. Father must have paid O'Leary a fortune; I've offered him enough for this fellow over the years, and the daft old codger never budged an inch."

"I can't refuse him, but there's no way I can keep him." Rose stroked the stallion's velvety muzzle. He made a low, whickering sound.

"I'll rent him from you," Draco said at once. "He can stand at stud at my yard, and we'll split the proceeds." He rubbed his hands together. "What splendid luck, he'll do excellently for Queen of Hex, and possibly for Sweet Circe as well!"

"I doubt if there was luck involved at all," Snape said dryly, "No doubt Scorpius suggested that Lucius buy the creature for Miss Weasley, with exactly this outcome in mind."

"Can we get it out of my garden?" Hermione asked, trying not to sound plaintive.

"I'll get a stall prepared for him and return to collect him," Draco said grandly. "We can Apparate him. All racing Granians are accustomed to being Side-along Apparated. I shan't be long."

He was as good as his word, returning within fifteen minutes, accompanied by a particularly tall elf who was wearing a tunic fashioned from a tweed horse-rug. The elf leaped lightly onto the stallion's back, at which Dancing Warlock whinnied and tossed his head.

"Take him for a short flight inside the Manor's wards to let him stretch his wings, then hand him over to Trimble for assessment," he said.

The elf nodded, and both horse and rider vanished with a loud bang.

"Assessment?" Rose enquired anxiously.

"It's two years since his last race; I've no idea if he's been ridden at all, or even flown, during that time. You would like to ride him, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, wow, of course I would!"

"Then my trainer needs to assess his physical state and gauge his attitude towards being ridden."

"Without using aversive methods, I hope," Hermione said. Draco gave her a rather superior smile.

"If you had ever attempted to ride a Granian, you would know that whipping it would result in your being deposited somewhere in the English Channel from a great height. They are sensitive, highly intelligent and biddable beasts in general. Of course, if O'Leary has kept him shut up in a stable and only allowed him out to service mares, he will require a degree of rehabilitation."

He turned to Rose. "I'll owl you Trimble's report and draft an agreement concerning his keep, stud fees, hire and so on."

"Thanks, Mr Malfoy, that would be great!"

He nodded, glanced around and added, "And I'll dispatch my gardener elves."

He Disapparated before Hermione could decide whether to thank him or to refuse on principle.

"If you have no further need of my services," Snape said, "I shall bid you good day."

"Thank you for your help," Hermione said. "After this, I really need to push Lucius ruddy Malfoy outside his comfort zone! You'll hear from me again very soon."

She was ridiculously pleased by his smile before he Apparated away.

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Lucius Malfoy stared down at the embossed card in his hand.

"To celebrate the betrothal of Scorpius Lucius Malfoy and Rose Weasley, you are cordially invited to afternoon tea and traditional games, upon the village green. This card is your Portkey. Please grasp it firmly at 2pm on Saturday. Dress optional; all equipment provided."

"Equipment?" he asked as the Portkey whirled him away from the Manor and deposited him smoothly upon a veranda in front of a low, white building.

The sun shone from a clear sky onto an expanse of closely mown grass, surrounded on three sides by mature beech, oak and elm trees. In the haze beyond the trees, he could just make out a couple of thatched roofs. As he turned to examine the building, he became aware that his body was no longer clad in his heavy silk robes, but instead he wore a white shirt and trousers with a sleeveless white, green-trimmed pullover and white boots with studded soles. His hair was neatly tied back. Despite his increasing indignation, he had to admit that it was a very sophisticated piece of charm-work.

"Well, well, you've grown almost trusting, Lucius."

Lucius could not help but stare. The voice was familiar, but Snape in white? Wearing sunglasses? "What's going on?" he demanded.

"We'd better move before we get mown down by the next arrivals," Snape said as he led the way down the steps onto the field. There were chairs set up in the shade beneath the trees, with tables bearing jugs, glasses, covered bowls and plates.

"Where are we? It was overcast in Wiltshire and threatened rain later. I don't recognise this place at all. It appears suspiciously Muggle."

"Does it?" Snape said unhelpfully. He indicated a large board, upon which white letters on little black squares spelled out 'Gentlemen vs Players, Captains, D. Dursley & H.J. Potter,' with two columns of names beneath them. Under 'Players' Lucius saw himself listed with D and S Malfoy, H, A and J Potter, F and H Weasley, N Longbottom and S Snape. The 'Gentlemen' consisted of names that he did not recognise at all.

"What the devil is going on, Severus?"

"Cricket, obviously," Snape said. "Clearly the 'Players' are wizards and the 'Gentlemen' appear to be Muggles or Squibs. Dudley Dursley is Potter's Muggle cousin, and I assume that the other Dursleys are his sons."

"Allan and Grahame," said Hermione Granger-Weasley, smiling as she came down the steps. She was wearing a summer dress of a light, floating material that displayed her calves and ankles to great advantage, and a large straw hat with matching ribbons. "And yes, Severus, you're completely correct. All the Muggles are related in some way to magical folk, so they know about us and won't be put out by any accidental displays of magic. Let's see; Simon Finch-Fletchley is Justin's brother, Carl Gilbert is married to a witch, and Joe and Jason Trussel are Squibs."

"I know nothing about this Muggle pastime whatsoever," Lucius told her. "I can't possibly play without consulting the rules!"

"Really?" Hermione asked. Her voice was light and amused. "Welcome to my world, Mr Malfoy. Do excuse me, I must go and greet my other guests!"

"Severus, do you understand this wretched game?"

"My father insisted upon my learning the basics," Snape said rather grumpily.

"Grandfather!" Scorpius bounded down from the veranda where his Portkey had deposited him, followed more sedately by Draco and Astoria. "Isn't this fun? You'll love cricket, I promise you. Dad and I'll explain it all to you, and you'll soon get the hang of it. Oh, look, Pimm's!"

"Muggle cocktail," Draco explained, "quite refreshing. Have they mixed it with lemonade or with ginger ale, Scorpius?"

"Lemonade. There's chilled champagne as well, and Chablis, and real ale on tap."

"Excellent!" Draco rubbed his hands together. "Not exactly Lords or the Oval, but delightfully civilised nevertheless."

"Don't look so worried, sir, it isn't too dissimilar from Quidditch," Scorpius said, taking Lucius by the arm. "When you're in to bat, you need to hit the ball as if you're a Beater; when fielding, imagine you're trying to catch the Snitch, and Harry won't make you bowl so don't worry about that."

"Wonderful," Lucius said, resisting the urge to pull his arm away. His daughter-in-law drifted towards a group of witches who were all clad in Muggle clothing. Their colourful dresses and broad hats, delicate shoes and light-weight jackets did indeed look surprisingly civilised, for a non-magical pastime.

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Village cricket could best be described as soporific, with occasional flurries of activity. Hermione watched from the shade as Draco and Scorpius attempted to explain the principles of leg before wicket to Lucius before sending him in to bat. Snape, who had scored a respectable thirty-two before being caught in the slips by Allan Dursley, lounged in a deck-chair at her side and sipped a tall glass of Pimms.

"Did you bribe the Headmistress to allow this," he asked, "or does your status as hero still carry enough weight?"

"Professor Vector has always been very fond of Rose," Hermione said.

"I assume that your daughter inherited your ability in Arithmancy, in that case, rather than her father's."

Hermione squinted up at the trees. "Did the elms give it away?"

He followed her gaze. "I hadn't noticed, to be honest, but now that you mention it, it is remarkable to see English elms in their prime. I dimly recall seeing the final years of the species as mature trees."

"Ah, so you felt the wards, then."

"Indeed."

"Do you mind? I ought to have warned you."

He lifted a shoulder. "Not particularly. I salute your ingenuity."

"I wonder if Lucius has worked it out yet."

"Lucius is too busy attempting to keep his dignity," Snape said, and there was a little curl of satisfaction on his lips.

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Sandwiches containing smoked salmon, egg and cress, roast beef or cucumber, accompanied by sausage rolls, pork pie, sherry trifle, strawberries and cream, plus plenty of chilled champagne, went some way towards restoring Lucius' mood.

"Out for a duck, indeed!" he muttered to Snape. Still, there had been something rather energising about this afternoon's activity. Perhaps he ought to consider physical exertion without the aid of magic more often. "Should I invite everyone to a day at the races next?"

"That depends upon how much you wish to impress Hermione."

"Would it impress her?"

"Not in the slightest," Snape said laconically.

They both glanced to where the lady in question was chatting to Ginny and Lily Potter. "A Granian stallion, Lucius? Really?"

Lucius almost blushed. "Perhaps that was a miscalculation. I've annoyed her, haven't I?"

"Very much so. You cannot buy her, or her daughter."

"So I'm coming to understand. What would you recommend next?"

Snape turned around to lean his forearms on the rail along the clubhouse veranda. "Stop trying to impress everyone and just do whatever will make Scorpius and Rose happy."

"I think I want to make Hermione happy." Lucius twirled his champagne glass between his fingers.

"Lucius, you only want to make yourself happy." Snape pushed himself upright and walked away.

Lucius stared out across the green sward of the cricket pitch to where the evening shadows were lengthening beneath the trees.

"Clever, isn't it?" Draco said, coming to join his father in his contemplation. "Not that I'd tell Hermione that, of course, but it took me long enough to work it out."

"Hm?"

"This." Draco swept his arm around in a circle, scattering crumbs from a slice of Victoria sponge cake. "Hogwarts, the Room of Requirement. Very clever."

"Yes," Lucius said thoughtfully. "Brilliant."

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Hermione opened the front door and blinked rapidly to clear her vision. If Severus Snape had appeared out-of-place upon her doorstep, then Lucius Malfoy looked totally alien. Alarm clenched abruptly in her chest.

"Is anything wrong?" she demanded. He turned from contemplation of the tiny front garden with its untidy riot of summer blooms and gave her a slight bow. "Wrong, my dear lady? Of course not; why should anything be wrong?"

"I assumed that something must have happened to Scorpius or Draco."

"You took me to be a harbinger of doom? In that case, I apologise for alarming you, Mrs Granger-Weasley. In fact, an apology is exactly why I have come. I am here to make amends for my behaviour."

Hermione could hardly leave him standing on the doorstep after that. She opened the door wide and watched him sweep inside. He made an admirable attempt to overcome his disdain at the cramped, homely and chaotic interior: only her six years of watching Snape in the classroom gave her the experience to detect the subtle flicker of a suppressed sneer. He even managed to smile at Biggles when the old Crup peered myopically up at him and gave a querulous woof.

"Charming," Lucius said.

Biggles farted and went back to sleep.

"The Granian was a miscalculation, for which I am sorry. Being aware that your daughter greatly admires the flying horses in Draco's stable and having the opportunity to obtain one of high quality, I desired to please her without thought for the consequences. I apologise for inconveniencing you."

"Apology accepted," Hermione said, and his smile, with the crinkling at the corners of his mouth and eyes, and the hints of appraisal in his grey eyes, made her chest flutter in a way that she really ought to have grown out of decades ago.

"Excellent! As a gesture of goodwill, would you care to join me for dinner on Saturday? I did promise you to introduce you to the Manor's library, did I not?"

"Oh," Hermione said, sure that she ought to refuse and equally sure that she wasn't going to.

"You will be perfectly safe," he assured her.

"That depends upon your definition of 'safe', I suspect," she said, and then realised that she didn't really want to hurt his feelings. "Thank you, I'd like that."

He smiled again and gave his formal little bow, and she asked, as if it was an afterthought instead of the first thing that had come to mind when he suggested dinner, "Is Severus still staying with you?"

Her attempt to sound casual might have fooled a Gryffindor, but this was no lion. His cool eyes flickered for a moment with an unidentifiable emotion. "I believe that Severus is planning his return to France, but I shall enquire. Good day, Mrs Granger-Weasley, until the weekend."

"Yes, I'll see you on Saturday."

He left the house in a flurry of silk robes and vanished with a pop.

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"That's bloody unfair!" Rose protested, "I can't even *talk* to Scorpius without a chaperone!"

"Despite the fact that you two have been at it like Niffles for the last year at least," her brother muttered.

She shoved him with her shoulder.

"Too much information, thanks," Hermione said. "I know, but this is a different situation. I'm a feeble widow who's long past the age of..." she allowed her words to trail off and waited until her children had their laughter under control. "Yes, Rose, I totally agree with you, and I promise that I'll ask Lucius if you can give up on the outdated customs and go back to normal life again."

"Oh, so it's 'Lucius' now, is it?" Hugo said, grinning wickedly. "I see. Are we going to have another wedding in the family? Granny Molly will have a conniption!"

"I hope not," Rose said. She sounded serious, and when Hermione met her daughter's gaze with concern, Rose blushed.

"Do you dislike him that much, darling?"

"He's reformed, I suppose. Scorpius and Draco love him. It's just..." Rose lifted one shoulder, suddenly reminding Hermione of the awkward teenager she had been not so long ago. "Oh, Mum! He's taking you for a ride!"

"Of course he is!" Hermione said as Hugo sniggered, "It might be fun, nevertheless. But I'll turn down the invitation if it distresses you that much."

"It isn't us who'd get upset, it's someone else oh, do be serious, Hugo!"

"You weren't worried about upsetting Granny Molly when it was all about you and Scorpius," Hugo pointed out. Rose rolled her eyes.

"Don't be dense! Of course I'm not talking about Granny Molly! She's just trying to control everyone as usual; she'll get over it. It's just there's someone else who fancies Mum, that's all, and I rather like him."

Deep inside Hermione, something shivered with excitement. "Do you really think so?"

"He watches you, and it isn't in quite the way that Lucius watches you. It isn't as predatory, more like admiring you from a distance."

"Who?" Hugo demanded.

"Work it out for yourself, clever-clogs."

"Oh, go on, you know I'm no good at this lovey-dovey stuff."

"It isn't lovey-dovey; it's just rather sweet."

"Perhaps old Lucius and this bloke will duel over Mum," Hugo said, brandishing his wand, "And Lucius'll end up in Azkaban for reverting to his evil Death Eater ways!"

"If they did get into a fight," Hermione said, "Lucius wouldn't be sent to Azkaban because there wouldn't be enough of him left to arrest."

Rose nodded. "I imagine your mystery admirer is ferocious. He certainly looks it."

"He is."

"Mum, if you go to dinner with Lucius, you're making a big mistake."

"No," Hermione said slowly, "only if I allow him to remain deceived. Thank you, Rosie, you've been an enormous help."

"What about me?" Hugo demanded as Hermione hugged her daughter. "Just because I don't get this mysterious female code doesn't mean I've only got the emotional range of a teaspoon!"

Ron had so often said that, teasing Hermione with her own words from long ago, and they echoed through the room. Hermione paused for a moment, feeling chilled.

"Mum?" Rose whispered, "he'd want all of us to be happy you as well."

"Whoever he is, this wizard isn't like Dad, is he?" Hugo asked.

Hermione shook her head.

"Well, then, you're not trying to replace him, are you? You're moving on to something else, and Dad would have liked that. He always said that there's no point in living in the past."

Rose and Hermione gaped at Hugo, who smirked and twirled his wand, sending up a shower of purple sparks, inadvertently setting fire to the curtains and putting an end to the conversation.

## Part 5: In Which Hermione Labours Under a Misapprehension, But Not For Long.

### *Chapter 5 of 5*

Twenty-nine years later, Rose Weasley declares her love for Scorpius Malfoy. Molly orders Arthur to have nothing to do with the Malfoys, so Hermione, now widowed, finds herself acting as the head of her family. Naturally, she turns to a book for advice on courting rituals; however, it fails to warn her about jealous Malfoys, the usefulness of owlBay, hungry horses, wizards in cricket whites, interfering elves, perspicacious offspring, the lure of libraries or the life-long loyalty of Crups. She does discover a fondness for elf-made wine and the production thereof, even though 'Château Bonfoi Elf-made Wines' has absolutely nothing to do with Lucius and everything to do with a mysterious arbiter – who is perfectly capable of telling Lucius exactly where he can stick his wand.

There was a loud pop, and Hermione looked up from her desk, wand in hand.

"You're a daft besom, missus, aren't you?"

"I beg your pardon?" Hermione stared at the elf. His arms were folded across his chest, and he wore a scowl worthy of his master.

"There I was, thinking I'd convinced the old sod to retire peacefully to the mother country at last, and some damn witch has to play silly buggers with him just to get herself into Lucius Malfoy's robes!"

"Hold on one minute..."

"Serve you right if they go and kill one another!"

"*What?*"

"Last thing I saw, they were at it like a pair of rival teenage boys, hexing one another up and down the Long Gallery and yelling curses!"

Hermione was on her feet before the elf had the chance to explain further. She twirled on the spot, chanting a spell to take her through her own wards, and vanished. The elf turned to stare along the length of Malcolm Braddock's wand. He raised a bushy grey eyebrow.

"Gryffindors," the elf said with a hint of reluctant admiration.

"Slytherins," Malcolm replied, putting his wand away. "Should I send the Aurors along later?"

"Nah," Ramsbottom said after a moment's cogitation, "I wouldn't bother."

"But someone might get hurt."

"Care to bet on who?"

Malcolm shook his head. "Pretty obvious, isn't it?"

The elf grinned evilly. "Yup. This is what stuck-up wizards get for not being polite to other wizard's elves."

"Fancy a cup of tea while we wait?"

"Don't mind if I do."

---

Hermione pushed past the alarmed-looking little elf standing in the front doorway of Malfoy Manor. She had no need to ask directions to the Long Gallery: she could hear the zing of ricocheting hexes from the entrance hall.

"But Madam mustn't..." the elf squeaked in alarm.

"Madam is bloody well going to!" Hermione snapped. She ran up the main staircase, wand raised and shielding spells at the ready.

"Bastard!" That was Malfoy, his usually well-modulated voice strident with anger or pain.

"I warned you!" Snape snarled, and there was the Professor Snape of old, spitting with fury. "I warned you, Lucius Malfoy, and if you..."

There was a crackle of spell-fire, and something exploded nearby.

Hermione reached the top of the stairs, although she retained enough common sense to pause and peer cautiously around the corner. Snape was standing in a classic duelling pose, feet braced, his *Protego* charm glowing as Lucius cast hexes from the dubious sanctuary of a half-open doorway.

"You expected me to play fair?" Lucius demanded, "Come on, Severus, when did *you* ever abide by the rules?"

"Stop it, the pair of you!" Hermione shouted. Snape whirled on the spot, his black robes flaring out around his legs, his wand high. Lucius sent a ball of fire towards him, but Snape had rotated his shield charm so that it covered his back, and the flames splashed harmlessly to the floor and fizzled out.

"You think you're so clever!" Snape said, blasting the door off its hinges. Lucius scrambled backwards out of range.

"That wasn't anything to do with you! You sod!"

Snape flicked his wand in the counter-spell to dispel an illusion and then frowned as Hermione failed to vanish. Lucius took the opportunity to send a couple of stinging hexes, causing Hermione to retreat and cast her own *Protego*.

"Why, Hermione, how lovely to see you!" Lucius exclaimed, a little out of breath but his good humour clearly restored. "I wasn't expecting you to arrive until tomorrow, but since you're here, are you joining in the fun?"

"Fun?" she demanded, outraged. "It doesn't look like fun to me!"

"Of course it is!" Lucius puffed, darting to take cover behind a sofa. "Simply a pleasant little work-out with a friend *Confrigo*!"

Snape snarled something indecipherable, and a wardrobe exploded behind Lucius, forcing him to dive to the floor and roll behind the bed.

"Severus, that was a seventeenth century armoire! *Stupefy*!"

"*Oppugno*!" Hermione shouted, and a dozen canaries burst out of the air and fell upon Lucius, shrieking with rage in their tiny, shrill voices. She spun upon one foot and launched another irate flock at Snape before he could take advantage of Lucius' distraction.

"Bloody hell, woman!" Snape bellowed, dousing the birds with a jet of water that flung them against the wall, "what was that for?"

"For behaving like a pair of stupid kids!"

Lucius spun a ring of fire around his head, engulfing the conjured canaries, and creating a stench of burned feathers. "I might have got a little carried away," he said, waving a hand to dispel the smoke, "but hardly enough to send in one of the heroes, damn it!"

"You were supposed to be testing a charm to detect the limits of shielding spells, not destroying half the house," Snape remarked.

"What?" Hermione had a sinking feeling, which came with the realisation that she had been set up.

"What did you think we were up to, my dear?" Lucius' smirk told her that he detected her embarrassment and intended to make the most of it.

"I was told oh, never mind! I'm sorry for interrupting you."

"Did you honestly think that Severus and I were fighting? Why in Merlin's name would we do such a thing?" Lucius flicked his wand and the bedroom behind him filled with a multi-coloured whirl of fragments, which came together in a complex pattern from which emerged the original furniture, seemingly intact.

"I was clearly given incorrect information," Hermione said between gritted teeth.

"And acted without checking it, obviously," Lucius agreed.

"As Gryffindors are wont to do," Snape said, tugging at the cuffs of his shirt to adjust them inside his robes.

"Did you think," Lucius asked, his eyes crinkling in suppressed amusement, "were you under the impression, dearest Hermione that we might have been duelling over you?"

Hermione was old enough to know how ridiculous that must sound, old enough to know that embarrassment was fleeting, and that it never killed anyone, but not so old that she didn't feel her face heating up. She glanced at Snape, but he was not laughing at all. He seemed a little pale, and his face was set in a mask-like rigor.

"Very amusing, Lucius," he snapped. "Have you quite finished mortifying your guests?"

"Why, I'm sure that Hermione has a perfectly sensible explanation."

"No, I haven't," Hermione said grumpily, "apart from being taken in by someone playing a joke on me. Pretend it never happened, and I'll go away." She paused at the top of the stairs and turned back. "By the way, do Scorpius and Rose really have to be chaperoned if they go out on a date? Since they've been in a relationship for almost two years and they're twenty-five years old?"

"Of course not. This is the twenty-first century."

"Then why the hell didn't you say so?"

"You didn't ask."

Hermione stared at him, her brow wrinkling as her brain whirled.

"So does that apply to everything? All these stupid, outdated traditions, are they all optional?"

Lucius shrugged elegantly. Hermione narrowed her eyes. "I see. Well, I hope that you derived some amusement from them, Mr Malfoy. Good afternoon."

She heard him call her name, above the emphatic sounds of her heels upon the staircase, but she was too indignant to listen. Only as she stepped outside the front door and took a couple of deep breaths, calming and centring herself ready to Apparate, did a wizard pop into existence in front of her. She raised her wand, but realised that she faced Snape. In a somewhat belated instance of self-preservation, she swallowed the hex that hovered on the tip of her tongue.

"Since it was your elf that tricked me into coming here, you can damn well tell Lucius where he can stuff his apology!"

"Lucius is unable to stuff anything anywhere until he has removed his wand from an intimate orifice," Snape said, scowling. "I am not his errand boy. What does Ramsbottom have to do with it, anyway?"

"He gave me the impression that you and Lucius were fighting." She sighed. "Actually, he made a few statements which might or might not have been true, and let me draw the wrong conclusion. I'm not quite sure why..."

"I shall have words," Snape growled.

"No, he meant well." She took a deep breath. "Lucius told me that you're going back to France. Is that true?"

He looked away, scowling at the pale shape of an albino peacock upon the edge of the lawn. "Yes, I've realised that my home is now elsewhere. There's no longer anything for me here."

His words made something in her chest feel tight and heavy. "That's a shame," she told him. "I'll miss you."

"Lucius visits regularly. You are welcome to accompany him."

Tentatively, Hermione reached out to touch his sleeve, and he looked down at her hand, pale against his black robe, but he did not move.

"I don't particularly want to go anywhere with Lucius," she said.

"He led me to believe that you will be joining him for dinner tomorrow evening with a view to exploring the delights of his library, among other things."

She snorted. "Since I've lived this long without the Malfoy library, I'm sure I'll survive the loss.*Expecto patronum!*" Her otter flowed from the tip of her wand, rolling onto its back as she smiled at it. "Please apologise to Lucius and tell him that I'll be unable to join him for dinner tomorrow. I have another engagement." She watched the otter as it gambolled in a circle before shooting away into the house. "There. Now I'm free to invite you to dinner with me, Mr Snape."

She held her breath as he turned to look into her eyes. There was no hint of Legilimency, just a touch of suspicion in his dark gaze, as if he thought that she might, in turn, be playing a cruel trick upon him. Far from feeling insulted, Hermione was saddened that his life had caused him to be so mistrustful. She deliberately opened her outermost thoughts to him, allowing him to read her respect and her burgeoning affection, and rather to her surprise, twin patches of pink appeared on his cheeks.

"That would be most acceptable," he said.

"Seven o'clock at my house? Would that be all right?"

He bowed his head in formal acknowledgement. "I shall be there. Good day, Hermione."

He disappeared with a crack.

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"Go and send Scorpius an owl," Hermione said. "Invite him to the theatre or something!"

Rose gave a little huff of laughter. "Hey, Mum, did you really manage to get Lucius to withdraw that stupid chaperone rule?"

"Yes, or at least, I got him to admit that it's all a load of codswallop, which amounts to the same thing. Go and enjoy yourselves."

"Don't forget your protective charms!" Hugo remarked, earning himself a swat around the ear with the newspaper. "Hey! I mean, haven't you looked outside? It's pouring down out there!"

"Ha ha, very funny."

"What about you, Hugo? Aren't you going out this evening?"

"I scent a conspiracy," Hugo drawled, putting aside *Juxtaposing Jinxes, Countering Curses and Healing Hexes: A Guide for the Realignment of Maladapted Magic* "Are you trying to get rid of us, Mum?"

"Yup," Hermione said, "I am. Just don't get too drunk."

"If you've invited Lucius here, I'd better take Biggles with me," Hugo said, stroking the old Crup on the sofa beside him.

"No, I haven't invited Lucius anywhere."

"Oh my god!" Rose squealed, "Are you two-timing Lucius Malfoy? Mum! You wicked witch, you!"

"I'm not doing anything with Lucius Malfoy," Hermione said sharply. "That is definitely not on the agenda at all."

"Well, I can't say I'm not relieved," Rose said. "What made you change your mind?"

Hermione looked down at the little curl of black and white fur. "Biggles."

"Really? Did he bite Lucius or something?"

"Don't be silly, the poor old thing could just about gum Lucius' ankles if he stood still long enough. No, when Lucius saw him, he pretended to like him. Severus just asked if he needed potions for his arthritis."

Hugo and Rose exchanged a look.

"I'll go and send Scorpius an owl."

"I'll send a Patronus to Jim, Al and Lils, see if they want to round up the gang for a night out," Hugo said.

Hermione rolled up her sleeves. "While I see if I can remember Molly's cookery charms."

Rose patted her mother's shoulder as she passed. "The numbers for the nearest Chinese, Indian and Italian take-aways are behind the clock," she whispered. "Just so you know..."

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In formal robes, Ron had looked a bit like a gangly kid playing dressing-up. Even as Aurors, he and Harry had always seemed homely, slightly scruffy, an unthreatening couple of mates ready for a lark. Their enemies almost always underestimated them.

Hermione watched her guest take his place for dinner, arranging his black robes so that they fell in graceful folds, and thought that no one could underestimate Severus Snape.

She had moved the table into the bay window, the curtains wide open, giving a view of the back garden and the open fields beyond the low fence. Draco's elves had not been content with putting right the damage caused by the Granian, but had left the beds overflowing with pansies and delphiniums, hollyhocks and cornflowers, roses and nasturtiums. The clouds had lifted, and watery sunlight glistened upon the newly washed leaves and flowers.

Snape seemed slightly wary. At first, she wondered if he still expected her to make fun of him, or if he believed that their date was a prank after all, but then her own apprehension registered, and she realised that they were both nervous. Had he been alone since the war, living with just the old elf for company and with the Malfoys as his only friends?

"This is all new to me," she remarked, Summoning the first course from the kitchen.

"Smoked salmon with crab pâté?" he enquired, lifting an eyebrow in the manner that she had once thought supercilious.

"Dating. Having dinner with a member of the opposite sex."

"Hm," he said, non-committal, then the edge of his lip curled up. "Yes, I know."

Something relaxed inside her. He reached into the pocket of his robe, removing a tiny bottle which he placed upon the table. A tap of his wand expanded it to full size. "You might appreciate a dry white with the seafood."

"I might indeed." She held out her glass. "Thank you. You know, of all the careers I imagined for you, vintner wasn't one of them."

"You mentally condemned me to an eternity of teaching adolescents, did you?"

"Hardly! It was clear that you hated teaching. No, I thought you'd be deeply immersed in potions or spell-crafting."

"But I am," he pointed out. "Admittedly in a limited field, but turning a mediocre Muggle vineyard into something capable of producing the finest elf-made wines in the world is hardly child's play."

"Really? I assumed that you bought successful vineyards and turned them over to the elves."

"Apart from the fact that the best vineyards don't come onto the open market, where would be the challenge or the profit in that? We buy up marginal land or small businesses that fail to generate a good income, gently extract them from the Muggle records, then spend years treating the soil, planting magically enhanced varieties of vines and creating the right buildings and equipment for the production of wines appropriate for their environment. It is an art."

"Obviously," she said, sipping the delicate golden wine. "What's this one?"

"A Grüner Veltliner from Austria, a versatile white, I find."

"It's delicious. Do you enjoy your work?"

"On occasion," he said dryly, "Do you?"

"On occasion!"

"Going into business with a Slytherin? How adventurous of you. I'm surprised that your parents-in-law didn't disown you."

"They weren't very happy, that's true, but Malcolm and I get on well and we complement each other. He's very good at customer service and warding charms while I'm well-organized and I enjoy the puzzles of curse-breaking."

"I assumed that you would have taken over the Ministry by now."

"Yes, at first, so did I."

"Real life intervened, did it?"

Hermione huffed. "Are you suggesting that I couldn't balance a career with rearing two children?"

"Hm, I was thinking more of 'real life' in the shape of your mother-in-law, actually."

"Yes, Molly did try to make my life hell when we were first married, but as every single one of Ron's sisters-in-law, and his sister, all wanted careers of their own, the effect rapidly became diluted. Then Molly realized that if all these young witches employed her as a child-minder, she could try to control the next generation instead."

"Which, I assume, worked as well as did her attempts to control her own children?"

"Exactly."

"You haven't responded to my initial question. Why didn't you go into the Ministry?"

"By the time I was eighteen, I'd had enough of being told what to do and of being manipulated to last me a lifetime. I am involved in politics. I'm currently campaigning for centaurs, hags and house-elves to be allowed wands if they wish to buy them."

"I doubt that the elves will want them."

"So do I, but a few centaurs and hags certainly do, and many more resent the fact that they can't, even if they wanted to. They're sentient beings. They're entitled to the same rights as witches and wizards."

Snape forked up the last morsel of his smoked salmon. "Perhaps it is as well for the Wizarding World that you didn't stand for Minister."

Hermione smiled sweetly. "There's still time, isn't there? *Accio* main course! I hope you like slow-roast lamb shanks in redcurrant jelly?"

"It smells delicious," he said, eying the gently steaming platters.

"It should be," Hermione told him. "A Muggle supermarket's finest. I can't cook to save my life. Ron used to prepare our Sunday lunches if we didn't go to the Burrow."

"You could follow a potion recipe well enough at school," he pointed out as he spooned baby potatoes onto his plate. "Or perhaps it finally occurred to you that if you always did everything for everyone else, they would never learn to do it for themselves?"

She beamed at him. "Got it in one."

"A shame that the lesson never sank in while you were at Hogwarts. You were such a frustrating student. Many was the time I had to hold back from throttling you and the rest of the tiresome triumvirate."

"You made your dislike perfectly clear, Professor Snape."

"It was not entirely personal."

"Much of it was. You hated Harry."

Snape leaned back in his chair, placing his fingertips together and gazing at her levelly. His black eyes were impenetrable. "I did, but the rest of the world was upon his side. Who sided with the Slytherins?"

"Another of my future campaigns involves doing away with that damned Sorting Hat," Hermione told him equably. "Please don't let your dinner go cold, Sainsbury's put a lot of effort into this."

Snape let out a snort of amusement. "Have you told Lucius? He'll fight you tooth and nail."

"Let him. I'm sure he's got a book somewhere explaining exactly why a person's entire life, from the age of eleven onwards, should be restricted by the ramblings of a

whimsical piece of mediaeval headgear."

He sighed dramatically. "It seems that we have both mellowed with age."

"I don't think we were all that different to begin with."

Snape placed his fork upon his plate and reached into his robe. "Would you like to try a somewhat tannic, brawny Merlot with the lamb?"

Hermione Summoned fresh glasses from the kitchen and placed them upon the table. "My children will be most amused if they come home to find me pissed out of my skull on Château Bonfoi wine."

"Growing old is tedious: we might as well do it disgracefully."

"I might find that insulting if I thought about it for long enough."

"It wasn't meant to be. I'm useless at romantic gestures, Hermione." He poured the wine and did not look at her face as he added softly, "Lucius is the one for those."

On impulse, she reached out and placed her hand upon his. He glanced at her through the hanging strands of his hair, and the vulnerability of his expression pierced her heart. "I'd far rather have dinner with you."

He did not reply, choosing instead to continue eating, but there was a faint blush of pink on his cheekbones and something approaching contentment in his eyes.

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*Ye Celebratione of Matrimonie shall be a Tyme of Mickle Merryment & Mirth. Ye Heades of Ye Families shall ensure yt Alle shall be welle among ye Cellebrants at ys Tyme of Meeting & Manye shall be ye Resultant Unions among ye Merry Folk.*

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Rose and Scorpius were married on a golden day in October on the lawn of Malfoy Manor, surrounded by their families, friends, elves and familiars. Terpsichore, Scorpius' imperious eagle owl, behaved impeccably, which was more than could be said for Biggles, who farted and barked asthmatically at intervals throughout the service, and Dancing Warlock, who browsed his way through a large arrangement of chrysanthemums and subsequently needed to be dosed with potions for colic.

Molly and Arthur were persuaded to attend by Draco Malfoy, of all people. He adored his only son, had grown fond of Rose and was prepared to dissemble, scheme and as a last resort grovel, in order to ensure their happiness. The fact that he was backed up by Harry and Ginny did not go amiss. However, much of his success was due to Hermione, who nobly offered herself up to replace Rose as family scapegoat.

"You do realize that carrying on a flirtation with a Slytherin, your ex-teacher and a marked Death Eater is making you unpopular in a number of quarters, don't you?" Percy told her. He indicated Molly, who was glowering at her, and a sneering Lucius on the opposite side of the lawn.

"I'm not carrying on a flirtation," Hermione said. A dour-looking old elf handed her a glass of champagne. "Thank you, Ramsbottom. Actually, Percy, we're having mad passionate sex on a regular basis."

"That's that's appalling!" Percy spluttered.

"Don't talk twaddle," Ramsbottom told him. "The awd sod's never been happier, and this baggage seems perky enough on it. You look as if you could do with a dose of the old how's-your-father yourself."

"Ramsbottom," a silky voice remarked, "do stop insulting the guests, or I'll allow Hermione to give you a wand."

"What do I want one of them things for?" Ramsbottom snapped his fingers, and a tray of brimming champagne glasses popped into existence upon his outstretched hand. Snape tilted an eyebrow. The elf sniffed and trotted off, balancing the tray easily on one finger.

Later, in the great ballroom, Lucius slid through the throng like a pike through a shoal of minnows and held out his hand to Hermione. "May I have the pleasure of this dance, my dear?"

"Only if you promise to be gracious in defeat."

Lucius laughed, softly, deep in his throat. "Oh, I assure you, I have plenty of experience of that."

Held lightly in his arms, the scent of his cologne teasing her senses, Hermione looked up into his coldly aloof face. "Go on, then, say whatever you've got to say."

"The obvious, naturally: if you hurt him, I'll do very unpleasant things to you."

"I took that for granted."

"I like to ensure that Gryffindors understand the situation. So many misunderstandings could be avoided if everyone knew where they stood."

Hermione chuckled. "Admit it, Lucius! You did your best to intimidate, confound and generally bamboozle me throughout Scorpius' entire courtship."

For a moment, she thought that she detected just a hint of penitence in his expression, but perhaps it was a trick of the candlelight.

"You proved surprisingly hard to disconcert, displaying an almost Slytherin ability to circumvent conventions at times. I rather think that you are one of the few people in the Wizarding World capable of keeping Severus upon his toes. I shall derive considerable amusement, watching from the sidelines."

"Be careful or I might construe that as a compliment."

"My dear witch," he said gravely, "I have nothing but the greatest respect for you and your delightful daughter, believe me."

Hermione had to admire the way he kept a completely straight face. "In which case, you'll vote for me if I stand for the board of governors of Hogwarts, next year, will you?"

"That should liven up the board meetings," he said, expertly guiding her around a group of conversing witches.

"Of course, there might be a conflict of interest if Severus ever decides to go back..."

"He'll never do that," Lucius assured her. "There are far too many bad memories there for him."

"His happiness matters to you, doesn't it?"

"Do, please, refrain from ever thinking that I am turning into an old softy," Lucius purred. "Narcissa, Draco and I expended quite a lot of effort in keeping the stubborn man alive; it would be such a shame to see those exertions go to waste. Besides, it would be an awful chore to find a new supplier to stock my wine cellars."

Hermione raised her eyebrow, and Lucius' lips curved into a smirk. "My dear, you need years more practice before that is the least bit intimidating."

"It wasn't meant to be. It was welcoming, in fact."

Snape tapped Lucius on the shoulder. "I'd like my witch back, please, Lucius."

"You wound me! Don't you trust me with her?"

"Of course not."

Lucius shrugged and released Hermione. She tucked herself under Snape's arm.

"Your friend Potter has just informed me that if I hurt you, he'll kill me."

"So if we fall out, Lucius will kill me and Harry will kill you."

"So it appears."

"Isn't it wonderful to have friends?"

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Biggles the Crup kept Hermione company as Rose, then Hugo, moved away to follow their own paths. When Severus Snape stopped vacillating, sold his house in France and finally unpacked his cauldron and bookcases, Biggles knew that his beloved mistress had no more need of his protection. He curled up in her lap for the last time and accepted the enticement of the strange old man in lilac robes to chase Fizzing Whizbees and Liquorice Snaps through fields of asphodel. After a suitable length of time, Lucius demonstrated rather more common sense than usual by gifting the couple a tawny owlet and a Kneazle kitten. He remained on cordial terms with his oldest friend, flirted outrageously with Hermione and annoyed the Weasleys at every possible opportunity habits which he retained to the end of his long and disreputable life. He spoiled his great-grandchildren rotten. They adored him.

~fin~