

New Beginning

by phoenix

Five years after the war Hermione's life is stuck in a rut. She's not sure what she wants in life, but she knows it's not starting a family with her husband, Ron. What will it take for her to find direction again?

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 29

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A/N: This story was written for NaNoWriMo back in 2009. I've been off and on working on it since then. I would like to thank past betas Ruth and Nicole for their help with the early chapters. Because of real life intruding for all, neither of them was able to help me through the whole story. Currently beawesley is lending a hand as my beta and her input has been amazing. I hope you enjoy.

Chapter 1

In the five years since the end of the war, Hermione's life had changed dramatically. A little more than six months after the war, she and Ron had wed. There had been a rash of marriages in the wake of the war as people wanted to celebrate being alive, and they had been caught up in it.

Ron had finished his Auror training near the top of his class, much to Hermione's surprise. It was a lot of work, much of it academics, and he had never really showed much interest in studying. She thought that Harry had a lot to do with that since Harry was very motivated to show everyone that he was so much more than the man who destroyed Voldemort.

Hermione had initially taken a job at the Ministry of Magic, working with the Muggle Liaison Office. That had lasted about six months, at which point she became bored of dealing with Muggle issues and wanted something more challenging. It had been hard for her to approach Arthur and explain to him that she wanted to do something other than work with Muggles, but in the end he had accepted her explanation that after having grown up in the Muggle world, it was not the challenging job she had expected.

Now she was working in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. She did not have a specific job, taking on various projects within the department as necessary. Some were assigned to her and some she proposed such as her project to improve house-elf welfare. She still wanted to liberate the house-elves from their slavery, but Ron had been right the elves did not consider themselves slaves.

Dobby had truly been an anomaly among house-elves. Even the other Malfoy house-elves seemingly had nothing to complain about. Reluctantly, she had shifted her focus to improving their welfare and had succeeded in getting physical punishment outlawed for misbehaving house-elves. It was not as much as she had hoped for, but it had been a step in the right direction.

It would take years, but she hoped at one point to accord the elves all the same rights a servant would have.

Her current major project had her working with the goblins. She did not really like working with them because they were so suspicious of all wizards, but she was trying to change that. Of course, most of the problems they were having with her stemmed from the fact that she was part of the Department for the Regulation and Control of

Magical *Creatures*. It did not matter that she was acting as a special emissary for the Minister of Magic in this case. Kingsley had selected her in hopes that her past association with Griphook might make things go easier, but it had not.

Unfortunately, she was infamous with the goblins for being part of the only successful robbery of Gringotts, which was something that *did* sit well with them. She had tried to remind Kingsley about this, but he had insisted that she probably understood them better than anyone else at the Ministry.

Now her workday was over, and she was in her favorite of all places the Great Wizarding Library. This is where she liked to come when she was feeling stressed. That meant that she had been spending a lot of time here lately. The librarians all knew her name and were always more than happy to help her find whatever it she needed. Though over the last four years she had learned so much about the library, she rarely needed their help anymore.

There was a small part of her that thought that she would be happiest working here in the library with the books, but she also knew that would be a misuse of her talents. She was a very powerful witch and, thanks to her association with Harry, a very influential one. She felt as though she had an obligation to the Wizarding World to use her talents to change things for the better. And she could not do that if she was nothing more than a librarian.

She sighed as she replaced the latest tome on goblins she had been perusing. Wizards and goblins had a long and contentious history. Professor Binns had only touched the surface of it in their History of Magic classes. It was far more complex than he had ever indicated. And it was such a shame that most Wizards had no idea. After all, History of Magic had been the most boring class imaginable, which was a detriment to everyone because it really was important to understand the past.

Of course, changes had been made at Hogwarts and there was now a living professor teaching History of Magic. Hopefully the next generation of wizards and witches would have a better appreciation of their past than her contemporaries had.

She heard the clock in the tower strike seven and she sighed. It was time to head home. Actually, *past* time to head home. She always lost track of time when she was in the library. It was so easy to lose yourself in the books. And she was sure she would hear about it from Ron ... *again*.

Even though she had made it clear that she wanted a career and that he would have to help in the chores, he still expected her to keep house like his mother. She tried not to fault him because that was the life he knew, but it was increasingly frustrating to constantly have to ask him to help with the chores.

Even more frustrating was the fact that he thought they should start a family and was becoming increasingly insistent. She was only twenty-three and there was still so much in life that she wanted to do before having children. She was not opposed to the idea, but she knew how much they changed your life. She only had to look at Harry and Ginny.

Ginny had played for the Holyhead Harpies for two years before getting pregnant. Now she had two children with a third on the way. Ginny seemed happy, but Hermione could not help but think how much in life she was missing. There were still places Hermione wanted to travel, not to mention things she wanted to accomplish at work. Ginny had very little time for anything other than caring for her children. Her Quidditch career was definitely over, and Ginny had dismissed the idea of doing anything else until her children were all at school.

And Hermione knew that once she had children, it would be much same for her. While some witches did work after having children, it was still an anomaly and mostly happened amongst the Muggle-born witches. Ron had already told her that he did expect her to stay home with the children rather than find someone to care for them.

Putting away the latest book she had been perusing, she headed for the library entrance. She was preparing her defenses for the argument she was sure to have with Ron for being so late. Unfortunately she was so lost in her thoughts that she did not see someone walking down the main aisle. When she exited the stacks, she bumped straight into a very solid someone. She had been in such a hurry and so distracted, that she lost her balance and fell on her bum.

"I beg your pardon, my dear," said a very suave and apologetic voice.

She was surprised by the politeness of the apology since it had definitely been her fault. She should have been watching where she was going. "No, really, it's my fault," she said. She noticed him reaching a hand down to help her up, and she gratefully took it. Embarrassed about having caused the accident, she kept her head down, hoping to slink away before she was recognized.

He said warmly, "Well, whoever's fault it is, I hope that you are alright."

She was a little sore, but was not going to admit it. "I'm fine. Thank you and again I'm sorry." She wanted to leave, but he was standing close enough to her that he was blocking the exit from the row.

"Are you sure? That was rather a hard hit. I would hate to leave you injured." He was clearly quite concerned about her well-being.

Even though she could feel her ankle throbbing, it was something she could easily remedy on her own. Finally deciding to look up at him, she replied. "I'm... fine," she finished in a whisper as she realized that the suave voice belonged to Lucius Malfoy. She braced for him to recognize her, agree that it was her fault and lash out at her for not watching where she was going.

"Miss Granger? Or I should say Mrs. Weasley." He sounded surprised, but not angry.

Hermione was startled by his reaction. It was not at all what she expected. Of course, he had changed since the war or at least he put on a good show. She had to imagine that having Voldemort take over your house and more or less sentence your child to death would be a huge catalyst for change. "Mr. Malfoy, how unexpected to see you here." She knew that it sounded trite, but it was the only thing that came to her mind.

He smiled weakly at her. "I like to spend my evenings here," he replied simply.

She could completely understand the comfort a person could derive from the books. After all, that was exactly why she came to the library. For some reason though, he had never struck her as the academic type. She was not sure why as she really did not know anything about him. "I find it soothing here," she replied lamely. She desperately tried not to blush. Normally she never had any problem finding words, but for some reason they had failed her now. She also found that she could not tear herself away from his eyes. They weren't the same cold, grey eyes she had remembered from her first encounter with him, but were softer, warmer. Physically he was little changed since she had last seen him at the trials following the war. The lines around his eyes were a little deeper, and he looked tired, but otherwise he was unchanged.

"Yes, it is very soothing. You can have solitude, yet you are not alone." His eyes took on a wistful, distant look before focusing back on hers. "But forgive me, I have detained you long enough. Clearly you are in a hurry, presumably to get home."

She could not help blushing. "Yes, I am. And again, my apologies. I should have been looking where I was going." As he finally moved to the side, she slipped by him. "Good evening," she said simply.

As she neared the main desk, she turned around and noticed that he was still watching her, a wistful smile on his mouth. Leaving the library, she was not sure what to think about her encounter with Lucius Malfoy.

He had been cordial and had not brought up her heritage. Of course the sentiment towards Muggle-borns had changed, and since he was ever the politician, she was sure he could be counted on to support whatever the popular opinion was.

Rather than heading straight home, she strolled aimlessly down Diagon Alley. Even though Lucius Malfoy was arrogant and bigoted, she had always found him handsome in a classical sense, though his internal ugliness had always overpowered the external beauty. This time though, she found that was not entirely the case. The internal ugliness seemed to be gone and instead of the harsh coldness she had always seen in his face, this time she saw some warmth even humanity.

When she realized she was thinking about Lucius Malfoy, she shook her head. "Hermione, quit being a git. That is ~~is~~ Lucius Malfoy!" Then realizing that she was talking to herself, she decided to Apparate home. There were more productive things to do with her time.

Arriving home, she heard voices coming from the dining room and her heart sank. They had invited Harry, Ginny and the kids over for dinner, and she had completely forgotten. After a giant sigh, she put as warm a smile as she could muster on her face. "I'm sorry I'm late," she said apologetically as she entered the dining room.

"We were beginning to wonder about you," replied Ginny.

Hermione could not help but notice the dour look on Ron's face. She knew they would get into it after the Potters were gone. He was holding his nephew, James, and quickly returned his attention to the child, who was looking quite tired.

Ginny rose to her feet to give Hermione a hug. "I hope everything's alright at the Ministry."

"It's fine. It's just been another *spectacular* day dealing with the goblins." She really did not want to talk about it. "Look at you! Are you sure you aren't due for another four months?" Hermione was surprised at how large Ginny had gotten. She knew it had been a few weeks since they had gotten together, but she did not think it had been that long.

Ginny and Harry chuckled and he moved to Ginny's side. Placing his hand lovingly on her belly and began gently rubbing it, he said proudly, "The Healer says we are expecting twins this time."

Hermione was shocked by this news. "Twins! Congratulations." She was trying to imagine what it would be like to have four children under the age of three, but she failed.

"We're still in a bit of a shock over this, but Mum's ecstatic," said Ginny. "Harry and I decided we wanted a big family, but I don't think either of us realized it would be this big so soon." The two of them laughed.

Hermione could not help but feel a little jealous as she looked at her two friends. There were so much in love and had so much in common. "I think it's wonderful," she said cheerfully. "I'm just sorry I missed the big celebration."

James let out a cry of discontent, and Harry went and picked the boy up. "Unfortunately, I think it's time for us to go. If we don't get little James to bed soon, it's going to be a long day tomorrow."

"Of course." She moved close to Harry and began circling her finger towards James' nose until he started giggling. "We'll have to do this again soon so that we can spend some time together. Maybe on a weekend so that work won't interfere?"

"Sounds good. Well, goodnight, Ron, Hermione," Ginny said, stopping to give each of them a kiss before picking up the baby carrier where Albus was sleeping.

After she showed the Potters out, Hermione turned to face Ron and saw the pleasant look he had had on his face was gone, replaced by a scowl. She braced herself for his tirade, having long ago learned that letting him go first made it better in the long run.

"I reminded you this morning that they were coming over for dinner. You said that you would be home on time tonight," he said sternly.

She could tell that he was not done yet and held her tongue.

"I don't think that it's too much to ask you that you be where you say you are going to be. I mean this is Harry and Ginny, it's not like this was dinner with my Great Aunt Muriel! They are your friends, too, and you disrespected them by not showing up on time." He was gesturing wildly to emphasize how upset he was with her.

Now she felt she had to defend herself. "I have told you that having dinners during the week isn't the best idea. I never know when I am going to have to work late. Emergencies happen and I can't just leave because of dinner." She knew this argument would fall apart this time because she had not had any pressing work this evening, but most of the time when she was late it was because of something that could not wait until morning. "I think that Harry and Ginny both understand how hectic my job can be," she said defensively and crossed her arms.

"That may be, but there are times when it looks like your job is more important to you than I am." He crossed his arms as well, letting her see that she was not going to get away with not discussing this fact.

There it was. He had finally brought up the elephant in the room.

After a long, uncomfortable silence, he moderated his tone and came over to her and rubbed her upper arms. "Hermione, I see how much your job is stressing you out. You deserve something more than that. Look how happy and relaxed Ginny is being a mother. And it's not like we need your income we could make it just fine on my Auror salary."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, slowly counting to ten so that she did not shout at him. "Ron, we've discussed this. I'm not ready to start a family yet."

"You keep saying that, but you never tell me when you will be ready," he said gently, his blue eyes honest and sincere as he looked at her.

She was surprised at how sensitive he was being. Finding that she could not meet his eyes right now, she looked away. "I don't know when I'll be ready. It's just something I'll know."

Using his fingers, he gently tipped her chin up so that she was looking at him. "... just don't want to wait too long. I think it would be good for our kids to grow up with Harry and Ginny's."

"Well, based on what those two have said, I don't think we really have to worry about that." It came out a little harsher than she had anticipated, but it was the truth. Ginny truly loved being pregnant and having children, so Hermione did not think they would stop adding to their family any time soon.

"Doesn't seeing Ginny so happy make you want to share in that?" Ron asked.

A part of her did, but the greater part knew that their relationship was not in a good place to have kids. Of course, a lot of the strife in their marriage had to do with the fact that they did not have kids. "I don't know. I just feel that there is so much left for me to do. I'm making progress with the house-elves and then there's the goblins..."

He interrupted her. "Why does everything have to come before us?"

She sighed and sat down on the sofa. "Because this is part of us. You have your career and I have mine. My work makes me happy."

"Does it really?" he shot back. "You come home stressed out all the time. You look tired and rundown." He paused a moment. "Does your work really make you happy?" He sat on the sofa, took her hands in his and watched her intently.

He had a point. "Maybe 'happy' isn't the best word, but it gives me a sense of purpose," she admitted.

"And raising a family wouldn't?"

She knew that it would, but there would always be the question in her mind wondering if there was something else she could have done for the wizarding world before

deciding to have a family. She pulled back from him a little. "It would, but this is different. I just feel that I have an obligation to use my skills to help those who can't help themselves."

"You can still do that after the kids go to school. You can't wait forever to have kids," he reminded her.

"Ron, I'm only twenty-three. There is plenty of time to have kids. If I was thirty-three I would feel differently, but we still have plenty of time," Hermione replied, trying not to sound defensive. She knew that part of this was pressure from Molly. After all, her *other* married children had given her grandchildren.

"Just think about it, Hermione. Think about what your job is doing to you. I want you to be happy, and to me you don't seem happy right now." He clasped her hands in his.

"I'll think about it," she finally replied. She had thought about it and right now, she was happy with her job, despite what Ron might think. She enjoyed the challenges and even the stress. He seemed to forget that she was the type who actually enjoyed exams at school. "Now, as I haven't eaten, I'd like to get something for dinner," she said, hoping this would end the discussion for this evening.

Ron took the hint and released her hands. "Sure. Sorry."

He was bright enough to leave her alone while she ate. The food was good enough that she had a sneaking suspicion that Ginny had probably taken care of cooking. Ron was not a bad cook, but he never did anything complex. She felt guilty about that since part of the reason of having the Potters over was so that Ginny got a night off from taking care of dinner.

Well, she had apologized and there was nothing that could be done to change the past. After eating, she cleaned up the dishes with a wave of her wand. She never tired of watching a kitchen magically clean itself. It was not long before the kitchen was clean and she could not avoid Ron any longer. She only hoped they could find something to talk about that did not involve her decision to wait on starting a family.

When she entered the living room, Ron was listening to the Wireless and was engrossed in the Canons' Quidditch match. Realizing that he wouldn't be up for conversation the rest of the evening, she picked up her book and curled up in her favorite overstuffed chair.

After about an hour, she decided it was time to head for bed. Without Ron noticing, she slipped out of the room and changed for bed. Deciding it would be just adding more fuel to the fire to not say goodnight, she returned to the living room and gave Ron a kiss and let him know she was heading to bed. He gave her a non-committal grunt, and she was reasonably sure that he had no idea what she had just said. She sighed, knowing that she had brought part of this on herself.

A/N: Once again many thanks to beawasley, Ruth and Nicole. I have truly enjoyed developing this story to something more than what emerged from the frenzy of trying to reach the 50k word mark in 30 days. I met and far exceeded that amount.

For those who do not like Ron and Hermione together, I ask for patience. This is not a Ron/Hermione story despite what you will see in the early chapters.

Chapter 1

Chapter 2 of 29

Three years after Narcissa's untimely passing, Lucius is still a bit of a hermit. Can something or someone bring him out of his shell?

Chapter 2

Many people had envied Lucius Malfoy's life. They thought he had it easy, inheriting the Malfoy fortunes. But they had been wrong. Being a Malfoy had *never* been easy. His father had been a cold, demanding man, expecting excellence from his son. And Lucius had delivered and then later gone on to raise his son the same way.

Like his own mother had coddled him, Narcissa had coddled Draco somewhat, though never enough to do any damage and probably enough to develop his humanity. After all, it was Narcissa who had saved them all from the madman, Lord Voldemort, when Lucius had given up all hope.

He was sure that most in the wizarding world did not see her as he had. Between her family history and the way she carried herself in public, they surely thought her as cold and heartless as they had thought him. In truth, she had been the keystone of their family, holding them together through even the darkest days.

His dear Narcissa, gone now nearly three years, a victim of dragon pox. How cruel that the same disease would rob him of both father and wife. He had been devastated by her death and still missed her immensely, thinking of her often. Once again he was reminded of one of her final wishes: she wanted him to find happiness again.

That thought made him laugh. There had been very little happiness in his life especially lately.

The wizarding world had changed much since the end of the war. First there was the damage control with the Muggles to ensure the existence of their world remained hidden. That had required a great deal of attention from the Ministry. After all, one could not Obliviate the entire world. It had been much simpler in the days before Muggles invented television. Incidents that would expose the wizarding world were isolated and could be easily controlled. That was no longer the case.

Plausible explanations had been devised by both the Muggle and wizarding Ministers. Once the weather returned to normal and strange incidents of destruction stopped happening, the Muggles moved on to other, more immediate issues. Thankfully Muggles seemed to have developed short attention spans.

On the other hand, wizards tended to have very long ones. Many had been skeptical about his claiming his initial devotion to the Dark Lord during the first war had been because of the Imperius curse. This time he had known that the same excuse would not be believed especially since he had been captured at the Ministry of Magic doing Voldemort's bidding.

Unwittingly, the Dark Lord had given him exactly what he needed to gain sympathy from the wizarding world. By forcing Draco to not only become a Death Eater, but to take on the surely impossible task of killing Albus Dumbledore, he had proven how he could compel his followers with the threat of force.

It had not been easy, but Lucius had managed to convince the Wizengamot that he had only supported Lord Voldemort because he feared for the safety of his family. It had been a long trial and not all of them had seemed truly convinced, but when he had offered to make restitution, both monetary and using his vast holdings to improve the wizarding world, they had finally relented and agreed to place him on probation, realizing he had greater value as a contributing member of society.

The hardest part about his plea had been watching the Aurors descend on his home and search it for Dark Artifacts. Actually ransacked would be a more accurate description. They had shown no regard for any of his possessions. The only saving grace was that he could blame anything that was found on the Dark Lord and his followers since his home had been their headquarters for the final year of the war.

The Dark Lord's *followers*. Those... there were few words that could be used to describe them. They were most definitely not the sort that Lucius would have ever deigned invite into his house, save Severus. There were werewolves, thieves, murderers and various other criminals and scum who made up the dregs of society, who only flocked to the Dark Lord because he sanctioned mayhem. To see them lounging in his furniture, eating his food, drinking his libations, soiling his home with their very presence had outraged Lucius, but he had been forced to hide that outrage and abide their presence. Their status as guests had only cemented in his mind that the resurrected Dark Lord was but a shadow of his former self, someone who had lost his sanity when his physical body had been destroyed, someone who had to be stopped, and Narcissa had agreed. Thankfully those hooligans had never touched his dear wife.

During the searches, Narcissa had gone to spend time with her sister, Andromeda, to make amends for their years of estrangement. The thought of watching strangers ransacking her home had been too much for her, and Lucius could not blame her. He had only been there because it was required. Watching them destroy his home had felt like they were ripping him apart piece by piece, but he had somehow found the strength to maintain his composure.

But it was all over. His home had been returned to its normal immaculate condition in short order, remodeled and redecorated to cleanse both the taint of the Dark Lord and the filth of his followers. After that he had focused on the rebuilding efforts. Fortunately his holdings were such that he was in a prime position to provide assistance. Of course, it was all done pro bono as a part of his probation, but after little more than a year, his businesses had returned to profitability and his reputation was being rehabilitated.

He was thankful that Narcissa had lived to that day. As Malfoy Industries grew in the boom following the war, they held a ball to celebrate their return to profitability. That was one of the last times most people saw her since she had fallen ill only a few days later.

Realizing that he was thinking of Narcissa again, he recognized that he had to get out of this big, empty house. He missed Draco, but his son was married with his own family now. And after Narcissa's untimely death, he had vowed that he would not impose himself on his son.

When he felt like this, there was only one place he could find solace: The Great Library.

It was late, and he knew that he would only have an hour at most, but it got him away from the manor and thoughts of the past. There were times that he had considered temporarily closing his family home and living in one of his other, smaller properties, but he felt he could not do that. He owed it to Narcissa to not abandon their home.

Once at the library, he wandered aimlessly as he did most nights. Typically, he would wait until he was drawn down one of the stacks and would select a book seemingly at random to enjoy until he left. Tonight he was walking in the history section when someone inexplicably ran into him.

He looked down to see a mess of bushy, brown hair and robes sitting on her backside.

"I beg your pardon, my dear," he said in a very apologetic voice, knowing that he had been lost in his thoughts as he waited for a book to choose him. He offered his hand to the young woman to aid her in getting to her feet.

"No, really, it's my fault," said the young woman as she made sure that her robes were covering everything that should be covered. She then took his hand, but avoided his gaze, clearly embarrassed about the whole situation.

"Well, whoever's fault it is, I hope that you are alright." The last thing he needed was for someone to claim that he had purposefully injured her now that his probation was nearly over.

"I'm fine. Thank you and I'm sorry," she replied dismissively as she straightened her robes and brushed off any dust.

He had to be positive. "Are you sure? That was rather a hard hit. I would hate to leave you injured."

Finally she looked into his eyes and replied. "I'm... fine," she finished in a whisper as she recognized him.

His eyes went wide as he realized who she was. "Miss Granger? Or I should say Mrs. Weasley." She was very much changed from when he had seen her at his trial. She had been polished and energetic. Now... she had let herself go. Her hair was an unruly mess, and it looked as though she was not getting enough to eat. She was clearly harried, as evidenced by the fact that she had not seen him walking down the aisle.

"Mr. Malfoy, how unexpected to see you here," she finally replied.

He smiled weakly at her, trying not to dwell on why he was here. "I like to spend my evenings here," he replied simply.

After an uncomfortable silence, she said, "I find it soothing here."

He could tell that she did not really want to be here speaking with him. Rather than give her an easy out from the conversation, hoping to prolong their encounter, he said, "Yes, it is very soothing. You can have solitude, yet you are not alone." His eyes took on a wistful, distant look before focusing back on hers. When she did not reply, he said reluctantly, "But forgive me, I have detained you long enough. Clearly you are in a hurry, presumably to get home." He was not sure why he was trying to strike up a conversation with her, but there was something about her that drew his attention. Of course, given his degree of loneliness, it could just be because she also loved books.

She could not help blushing. "Yes, I am. And again, my apologies. I should have been looking where I was going." As he moved to the side, she slipped by him. "Good evening," she said simply.

He watched her as she departed. She should have been so young, so full of life, but something was clearly taking its toll on her. Curiosity caused him to ponder what it might be. As she neared the main desk, she turned around, and he did not hide that he was watching her with a wistful smile on his face. It had not been much of a conversation, but it had sparked something in him he had not felt in some time.

Once he realized what he was doing, he forced himself back to reality. That was Hermione Weasley née Granger. Of all the women in the wizarding world, she was the last one he should be concerning himself with, but that was exactly what he was doing. Not only was she young enough to be his daughter, but they had been on different sides of the war. Not to mention that he had actually made it a point to insult her in the past and in that past he had never hidden his disdain for those not of pureblooded lineage. Though that had changed, there were many who did not believe his views were sincere.

No, he was just a mature wizard fantasizing about the first young witch he had run across after he had been thinking about finding a new partner. But...

He wondered what she had been up to in the wizarding world since the war. Most of his attention had been focused on restoring his name and reputation along with his fortune. He would be the first to admit that he had not followed the fates of the war heroes. It was not that he did not care, it was just that he had more important things to be doing than to follow the latest gossip about Harry Potter and company.

Deciding he would pursue modern history rather than ancient history, he headed to the section of the library that housed the *Daily Prophet* archives. It would be tedious, but he had little else to occupy his free time. This sort of research project would span several days would give him something to look forward to each evening.

Researching a chronicle history on Hermione consumed Lucius' free time over the next several weeks. Going through back issues of the *Daily Prophet* was tedious, but in the months following the war, her name was in the news quite a bit.

What surprised him was how often she had been in the news without Potter or Weasley as the months passed. Initially articles were about the three of them. As he read her account of how they evaded capture for so long while searching for the Horcruxes, he gained new respect for her. There were very few fully qualified wizards who had managed to elude the Death Eaters, but for partially trained young adults to do so while searching for something was quite impressive. Yes, they had almost been caught in Godric's Hallow, but even then they had managed to escape.

As the most famous of the Muggle-born witches or wizards, there had been numerous interviews in the *Prophet* asking her about what sort of role she thought the Muggle-borns would have and if there was a way to improve the way they were brought into wizarding society. Her interviews were very insightful, and he could not believe that he had not read them before.

Like his former master, he had clearly underestimated her.

After her wedding to Weasley, the number of articles dropped off. Once every couple of weeks or so there would be something about some project or another that she was working on for the Ministry, but little else. She obviously preferred to live her life out of the limelight.

Knowing the *Prophet*, he knew that it would not contain all the facts about her work for the Ministry. If he wanted to know more about what she was doing for her job, he would have to go to the Ministry and research their records.

The only problem with him researching Ministry records is that he was sure someone would want to know why. And at this point he did not have a good answer. And that bothered him. Normally when he took an interest in someone, he could pinpoint the reason he found them interesting.

After several days of not being able to get her out of his mind, he determined that a visit to the Ministry archives was in order. But he decided that rather than just investigate Hermione, he would tell the record keeper that he was searching for underappreciated talent for his business. That would be a request that should draw no undue attention and still allow him to investigate Hermione. He was almost positive that she was one of the underappreciated employees. After all, she had been very driven at Hogwarts to be the best in her year, much to Draco's chagrin, and currently held a very minor post in Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

Feeling confident in his plan, Lucius strode into the Ministry's records department. He flashed his most charming smile at the middle-aged witch sitting at the desk. "Good day, madam. I was wondering if I could have access to the last three years or so of records."

She gave him an imperious look. "And what in particular are you looking for?" she asked in a brusque and businesslike tone.

He poured on the charm. "Nothing specific, at least nothing that I know the details to. Malfoy Industries is hiring, and I was looking for some underappreciated talent here at the Ministry who might be interested in a change of scenery." He flashed her his most winsome grin.

"Well, normally we do ask that inquiries are for specific information," she said, but her voice had lost its earlier sternness.

He pulled a small box of chocolate out of his pocket and placed it on her desk. "Unfortunately, I do not know which information to ask for as I am not privy to the young Ministry staffers."

Her eyes widened when she saw the chocolate, a very expensive and coveted Swiss brand of chocolate. Carefully she slid the box into her drawer. "Well, I suppose I could show you some of the more *interesting* paperwork from the last couple of years." She rose from her desk and led him into the archives.

He allowed himself a victorious grin as he walked behind her. Manipulating people was something he had always been good at, and this proved that he had not lost any of his prowess. He patiently waited while she waved her wand and magically summoned various records, which stacked themselves neatly on a nearby table.

"That should keep you busy for a while," she offered as she put her wand away.

"I am extremely grateful to you, Madam Watson," he said with a small bow.

She giggled and blushed. "Let me know if you need anything else, Mr. Malfoy," she said before leaving him with his paperwork.

Sitting at the table, he began skimming through the paperwork she had given him, looking for work by Hermione and a few others who might seem interesting. He had thought of picking names at random, but he reconsidered in case she had given him something by someone who would not be a fit for his holdings.

He set aside everything regarding Hermione and after about an hour of skimming the other documents, he managed to pick two other individuals whom he would ask Madam Watson about. He then devoted his attention to learning what Hermione had been doing at the Ministry.

After three days of research, he thought he understood Hermione a little better. He could tell that her intellect was woefully being underutilized. She had so much potential, and she was wasting it in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Civil service at the lower levels was something for the adequate witch or wizard. She was exceptional and belonged in the private sector.

Now all he had to do was convince her of that. And he knew that would be quite difficult since he would have to first find a way to convince her to spend time with him. Of course, she had not immediately fled from him upon discovering whom she had run into at the library, so there was hope.

All he had to do was to devise ways to surreptitiously meet her, find opportunities to talk about her future and to convince her that it was not with the Ministry. Given the stress she seemed to be under, he did not think it would be too difficult to convince her that she needed a change. While working for one of his companies would not be stress free, her intellect would be appreciated and compensated accordingly, something the Ministry just could not do.

Of course, based on what he knew about Hermione, the money would not be what would convince her to leave her Ministry job. It had to be something job related that drew her away from the drudgery of the Ministry and her current work with the goblins.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 29

Hermione is beginning to contemplate whether or not the Ministry is the best place for her work.

Chapter 3

Hermione rubbed her temples. Her work with the goblins was *not* going well. They were obstinate, much more obstinate than anyone had a right to be. She had tried to understand them, tried to relate to them, treated them as more than equal to her and still she was getting nowhere.

Even though it was the middle of the day, she needed a break. She needed to get out of her office, out of the Ministry and enjoy some real sunlight.

Just walking out of the office made her feel more relaxed. Of course it did not help that not only was she getting stress from her job, but she was also getting stress at home from Ron. He did not bring up their future every day, but two or three times a week he could be counted on to say something even if it was an offhanded comment about children. And it had not helped when they had learned that Percy and his wife, Audrey, were expecting another child. To Hermione it seemed as though everyone was having children and the world was conspiring against her desire to do something other than become a mother.

Molly had been asking them to come over for dinner for several weeks. Hermione had been finding reasons not to go to the Burrow, but she knew that she was running out of excuses. They would have to go soon, and then she would be assaulted with how *wonderful* it is to have family and aren't the *grandchildren* precious and wouldn't you like to have one of your *own*? The fact that she was trying to make the wizarding world a better place was seemingly inconsequential compared to grandchildren, she scoffed.

There mere thought of that dinner made her head throb even worse, and she forced thoughts of it out of her mind. Nothing was to be gained by dwelling on what other people thought of her. When she reached the main lobby of the Ministry, she decided to take the Floo to Diagon Alley. She preferred Apparition, but with her headache, she did not trust herself to not Splinch.

Once at The Leaky Cauldron, she exited into the alley to enter Diagon Alley proper. She was not in the mood for heavy pub food. Instead she decided she would get some coffee and perhaps a pastry from the new French bakery.

After ordering, she found a secluded table and pulled out a book to read. She figured that half an hour or so would be enough to refresh herself for the rest of the day. Normally she wouldn't have left during the middle of the workday, but she had reached her breaking point. She had spent her day trying to convince those above her that even though she was young, her opinions were still valuable. Apparently all they saw was just another low-level employee still paying her dues. She could not believe how myopic the Ministry was and it frustrated her. All she wanted was for them to seriously consider the ideas she had, not just dismiss them with a curt 'we'll take it into consideration' which translated to 'thanks but no thanks'.

She easily became absorbed in her book and so was surprised to hear someone say, "Excuse me." She looked up and was even more surprised to see Lucius Malfoy.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Weasley, but I was wondering if this seat was taken?" he asked cordially, a slight grin on his lips.

She was just about to tell him that while it was not taken she wanted to be alone when a quick glance showed that all of the other tables were taken. She sighed. "No, it's not."

"I do apologize for intruding on your solitude," he said sincerely as he took the empty chair.

She tried to return to her book, but found herself having a difficult time even though he was doing nothing to disturb her. Finally she just put her book away and decided to concentrate on her coffee and pastry.

"Are you well?" he asked, concern clear in his voice.

Looking up to meet his eyes, she snapped, "Why do you want to know?"

"Forgive me for sounding concerned. I just thought that you look a little sallow, tired." He sounded hurt from the harshness in her voice.

She realized she was taking out her frustrations on someone who had done nothing to offend her for years. In fact, she could not recall having interacted with him since his trial. "I'm sorry. I'm just under a lot of stress, that's all."

"Yes, working for the Ministry can be quite stressful, can't it?" he asked before taking a sip of his tea.

She wanted to ask him what he would know of that, but she forced herself to be civil. "Very, but also very rewarding." The response came automatically since she was used to defending her job by now after all, she had to do it constantly with Ron.

"Have you considered a different career?" he asked offhandedly.

She grew a little suspicious over this question. "What do you want?" she demanded.

"I was merely trying to strike up conversation while enjoying my tea. I beg your pardon if my questions were too intrusive," he said in a chastised voice.

"Is that really it?" she asked suspiciously.

"Are you implying something?" he asked flatly as he set his cup down.

She leaned towards him across the table and lowered her voice. "Look, you've made no secret that you don't like my kind, and that you don't think much of me, but you had to have chosen to sit at my table for a *reason*." She was convinced he was manipulating her in his very Slytherin way, and she'd be damned if she was going to let him get away with it.

"To address the latter first, I chose this table because there was an open seat. Since you were buried in your book, I had no idea that you were the other occupant. As to the former, I will agree that I have been... disrespectful towards Muggle-borns in the past. The events of the war taught me many things, and one of them was that all persons of magical ability should be included in our world. As to you," he stared into her eyes showing sincerity, "I have come to have a great deal of respect for your skills. It was your actions that caused me to reevaluate my stance towards Muggle-borns, to realize that pureblood familial prejudices are to be questioned."

She continued to eye him warily, trying to decide if he was sincere in his words. After all, his words were the same sentiments expressed in the current popular political circles, and Lucius Malfoy was a consummate politician who excelled at telling people what they wanted to hear. But she had detected no deception in his voice or demeanor. Completely shocked by his apparent honesty, she asked, "Really?"

He picked up his teacup and took another sip. "Indeed. And I cannot blame you for being suspicious given my past behavior. But if you will look into what I have done since the war, who I have hired since then, I think that you will see that my words are sincere." He took one last sip of his tea before setting the cup down. "Now, if you will excuse me, I must be returning to work." He rose and gave her a polite bow. "I hope that you found our conversation quite enlightening. Good day, Mrs. Weasley," he said softly and sincerely.

Hermione found her heart fluttering as he delivered his farewell because of the smile he gave her. It was a smile that made her feel special in a way that Ron's smiles never did. She was still taken aback by the warmth in his eyes. Those were not the same eyes she remembered from before the war. Those had been cold and calculating eyes, eyes that told you to be wary of the person they belonged to. Of course, the war had changed everyone.

He had told her he had changed and that she could see that if she looked into his actions since the war. She had not cared much about what happened to the former Death Eaters. The worst of them had been sent to Azkaban. At that time, she had pitied the Malfoys and come to respect Narcissa for risking everything to help Harry defeat

Voldemort. But she had never really felt anything for Lucius. She had believed that he very well might not have had a choice about becoming a Death Eater, though she did not think his circumstances were as dire as Draco's.

Harry and Ron had been upset that Lucius had weaseled out of punishment again, but the Wizengamot had been more open-minded than her friends. While he had been given his freedom, it was on a very strict probation, one that most of the wizarding world had accepted. She had seen the logic in the Wizengamot's sentence and had tried to argue it with Harry and Ron, but had quickly given up because they would not be swayed.

When it came to Draco, it was no secret the two of them had never gotten along at school, but she had never wished him ill will. Instead, she had hoped that he would one day become enlightened about the value of the Muggle-borns, though given the fact he had been in Slytherin, she had not been hopeful.

She knew that she should return to the office, but Lucius had piqued her curiosity. While her work could wait a little while, it wouldn't be like her to disappear for the afternoon. She decided that instead she would leave a little early and stop at the library on the way home.

For the rest of the week, Hermione made stopping at the library on the way home a habit if her work did not keep her too late. From everything she could read about Lucius and Malfoy Industries, it really did seem as though he was reformed. He had not only hired Muggle-borns, but he had placed them in some rather important positions, positions in which he would have to interact with them on a regular basis. Justin Finch-Flechly had recently been promoted to the Head of Marketing for Wizardgate Books and there was a picture of the two of them in the *Daily Prophet* and Lucius had his arm around Justin's shoulder.

Then she started to dwell on his question to her at bakery. He had asked her if she had considered a different career. To be honest, she had not. She knew that to affect change in the wizarding world, she would have to work for the Ministry. After all, that's where the laws were made. And his suggestion included breaking with Ministry hierarchy.

But after five years of having to deal with the reality of working for the bureaucracy, she started to wonder how much of a difference she was really making. She was still just one of the many faceless employees within her department. Her ideas were rarely respected and were generally dismissed, no matter how reasonable they were. She was beginning to wonder how long it would take before she would rise to a position where someone would listen to her. If the wizarding world was anything, it was very resistant to change such as most choosing to wear antiquated robes rather than more modern garments.

Deciding she needed some fresh air to clear her mind, she left and strolled down Diagon Alley. If she did leave the Ministry, what would she do? She had done well in school and after the war had been allowed to sit her NEWTs. Taking into account the practical knowledge of magic she had demonstrated during what would have been her seventh year, she had naturally achieved Outstandings in every subject. Of course, being who she was, she was sure that most places would be glad to hire her for the prestige of having one of the War's biggest heroes as an employee regardless of her qualifications.

She entertained the thought of teaching at Hogwarts, helping the next generation of witches and wizards grow into productive members of society. It was a noble profession, but she was not sure she really wanted to do that. It would take years for her efforts to pay off, and Minerva had assembled an excellent staff after the war, so she had no idea what she would teach.

Other than what she had learned about Malfoy Industries over the past few days, she realized that she did not know that much about the major wizarding companies. Oh, she knew the basics such as what they produced, but she had never really put much thought into most of them.

She had been good at Potions, so maybe she could work at St. Mungo's? The work would be rewarding, and then she could pursue any Potion's research she wished. And it would definitely be interesting since you never knew what would be needed on any given day. Just like at Hogwarts, witches and wizards were constantly having magical accidents. But St. Mungo's was another bureaucracy, and she wasn't sure that's what she wanted. She would once again be starting at the bottom and feared that until she had worked her way up, she would get little respect.

Clearly she would have to put some time and effort into deciding what she wanted to do with her life. But at this point, she was reasonably sure that she did not want to continue toiling away at the Ministry in a job that had negligible impact.

Of course, this was not something that she could tell Ron. If she told him she was considering leaving the Ministry and changing jobs, he would use that as reason enough that she should take time off and stay at home and start a family. No, she would only tell him once she had selected her new job.

She lost herself in her thoughts, trying to determine the best way to go about looking for a new job without Ron finding out about it, when she bumped into someone coming out of a shop. "Pardon me," she said and then looked up to see who it was. "You!"

"Good evening to you, Mrs. Weasley. And it is my turn to beg for pardon," replied Lucius Malfoy.

She had gone five years without seeing Lucius and now she had run into him three times in the last few weeks. If she believed in Divination, she might think this was an omen. "No, it's my fault. I should have been paying more attention to where I was going," she replied, slightly embarrassed that she had run into him, literally, yet again.

"We do seem to be making a habit of this," he replied jovially.

She returned his smile, finding it infectious. She was going to comment on it being a habit when it started raining. The drops were fairly light for a moment before they quickly became bigger and more persistent as they landed heavily on her head.

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed, uselessly flinching away from the water bombarding her. "I'm really sorry, Mr. Malfoy, for running in to you again, but I'm going to leave now and get home." She didn't wait for his reply, and instead she turned for the Leaky Cauldron where she could Floo home. She was too preoccupied with her desire to stay as dry as possible to be worried about any rudeness her abrupt departure might have caused, so she was surprised when Malfoy fell in to step beside her.

"I'm fine, really. You don't have to follow me," she said, not bothering to hide the irritation in her voice.

"No need to be paranoid, my dear. I happen to have business at The Leaky Cauldron," he replied simply. "If you will allow me?" he asked as he pulled out his wand and cast a water repelling charm.

Hermione mentally kicked herself. She had been so distracted with her thoughts and the strangeness of running into Malfoy again, that she had forgotten she could use magic to stay dry. "Thank you," she replied quietly, trying to hide her embarrassment.

"My pleasure," he responded cordially, no sign of derision in his voice. After a few seconds of silence, he asked, "How is work at the Ministry?"

"Busy, more of the same," she replied somewhat evasively. It was a perfectly innocent question, but it put her a little on edge.

"Good to see the Ministry is utilizing your talents," he replied simply.

"Oh, yes," she answered quickly, almost too quickly. She did not want to admit to him that while she was working hard, she still did not think she was getting the recognition she was due. She felt she should say something. "So how is business?"

"Expanding. It's been a very good year. But I would hate to bore you with the details."

"Oh, I don't think it would be boring," she replied, trying not to sound too eager. Since she had started researching Malfoy Industries, she had become quite intrigued by everything they did.

He laughed softly. "Well, I fear it would take more time than we have." They were nearly at the entrance to The Leaky Cauldron. "Besides, some of it... Well, there are

some aspects of business that need to remain confidential," he said with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

She flushed slightly. Just as she did not get into specifics about her work, she should have expected the same from him. Noticing they had arrived, she said, "Thank you for the water repelling charm, and again, I apologize for running into you."

"It was nothing, my dear. Have a good evening. Perhaps we'll run into each other again," he said with a smile and a small bow of his head before turning away from her to conduct his business. This time, it was her turn to watch him as he disappeared down the hallway where the private dining rooms were.

She found her curiosity was piqued with regards to Malfoy Industries. He had seemed to indicate that he was working on something interesting, something big, something secret. She tried to push it from her mind. She was doing something noble in the Ministry of Magic. If she worked for Malfoy she would only be working to increase his profits wouldn't she?

While there were several companies within his holdings that produced luxury goods, there were also many that produced goods for use in everyday life. There were also the many research divisions which strived to make advancement in potions, medicine and charms, not to mention all the people who were employed for him. In total Malfoy Industries was the largest employer in wizarding Britain outside the Ministry of Magic. So it wasn't like she would be doing something frivolous with her life. She could still do something to help out the wizarding world, but just not in the way she had initially envisioned.

Would it really be that bad working for one of his companies? They were among the most successful in the wizarding world, which meant that was where the best were working. But what would Ron and Harry say? Would they care? She was not sure of the answers to those questions. If someone had asked her last month about working for Malfoy, she would have replied with an immediate and emphatic no, and would have probably sent that person straight to St Mungo's. Now, she was seriously contemplating leaving the Ministry for somewhere her talents might be better appreciated.

As she waited for the Floo, she could not help a small uncontrollable laugh from escaping. The elderly wizard waiting in front of her gave her a strange look. When she just smiled at him, he shrugged and decided to mind his own business.

For Hermione, the next week was very stressful. She had finally been forced to go to the Burrow for dinner. Unfortunately it had been a family dinner, which meant that everyone was there. Ginny, being the most obviously pregnant, was unsurprisingly the center of attention, though Audrey got her fair share of attention as well as she had recently announced she and Percy were expecting again. As the evening wore on, the conversation naturally turned to the question of when Ron and Hermione were going to start their family.

Amazingly Ron deflected the questions handily without making it seem like Hermione was the one being stubborn. She was actually proud of him for presenting a united front.

They could both see the disappointment in Molly's eyes when they made it clear that they weren't looking to start their family in the immediate future. Hermione was determined to live her life on her terms, not one what everyone else expected from her. It seemed as though Ron was finally accepting that by publicly supporting her.

At least that was what she thought until they got home.

Once the door was closed, Ron asked, "Hermione, what do you have against starting a family? You knew that children were important to me before we got married." He sounded hurt.

She sighed. "Ron, I've told you that I have nothing against children. I just want to wait a few more years."

"Until when? Can you give me a date, a precise year or maybe even the event that is going to happen in your life that will signal you are ready to have children?" he asked sharply.

She went on the defensive. "No, Ron, I can't..."

"Then why do you want to wait?" he snapped, interrupting her. "You can't tell me that you know what your career defining moment will be. If we keep waiting, nothing may happen that is your moment of glory and then it might be too late."

His statement felt like a slap in the face. "Ron, I'm only twenty-three! I know what I'm doing," she snapped back.

"Do you? I've talked to Dad, and he says you are bouncing from project to project seemingly at a whim. You don't have anything long term or a big project that you are doing. And look at what it's doing to you?" He pointed at her.

She crossed her arms defensively. "What do you mean?"

He took her gently by the shoulders and stood her in front of the mirror by the door. "Look at yourself. You're a mess. The stress is really getting to you." He stood behind her, forcing her to really look at her reflection.

Hermione had never really been concerned with personal appearance, mostly because her bushy hair was incredibly unruly. When forced to take a close look at herself, she saw her sunken eyes with the dark circles, the sharpness of her cheekbones, and hair that looked more unruly than usual.

Faced with the ugly reality of what she was doing to herself, she collapsed to Ron's chest, hiding from her reflection, and started crying. "Oh, Ron. I'm so sorry, I didn't know."

Ron wrapped his arms protectively around her. "I'm sorry I had to do that to you, but you haven't been taking care of yourself. I know you haven't been sleeping well, and you haven't been eating well either. I'm worried about you, worried about what your job is doing to you. I think that you are trying to do too much at once."

She leaned into his comforting embrace. He was right. She was trying to do too much at once, but it seemed to be the only way to get noticed. She always volunteered for the most difficult and visible projects hoping one of them would bring her deserved recognition and respect. Perhaps it was time to scale down her work a little. That would give her more time to research other employment options. "I'm so sorry," she said quietly as she finally gained control over the tears.

Ron gently helped her to her feet. "Now, it's getting late, so why don't you go to bed and get some rest?"

She thought that sounded like a wonderful idea even though she knew it was not that late. Ron was just trying to be polite about getting her to take care of herself.

Once in bed, it did not take Hermione long to fall asleep. She was mentally and physically exhausted, and now that she had been forced to admit it, sleep came easily.

When Hermione woke the following morning, Ron was not next to her. She glanced at the clock and saw that it was after nine o'clock, and she panicked. After quickly throwing on some robes, she hurried towards the door and found a note stuck to it. It was from Ron.

Hermione,

I contacted your boss and Dad and they have arranged for you to have the day off. I don't want you thinking about work, or doing anything work related today. It's your day to have fun and take it easy. Tonight we'll go out to dinner so you don't have to worry about that.

Love,

Ron

Her panic subsided as she realized that she was not late for work. She had a whole day to herself, and she could hardly believe it. She was the type who never took a day off from work unless she was truly ill. In this case, though, she would not look a gift horse in the mouth.

Noticing the rumble in her stomach, she decided to go find something to eat and then she could spend the day at the library. That wouldn't *really* be work since she enjoyed books. And if she used her time there to peruse some of the wizarding business journals, well, that would be alright, she reasoned. She would just have to be careful not to lose track of time and be home for dinner.

After breakfast, she tucked her notebook into her bag and headed to the library. Once there she flipped through periodicals, stopping when something caught her eye since she really did not know what she was looking for. She could have easily just looked at job listings in the *Daily Prophet*, but she would want to know something about where she was going to work so it seemed to make sense to find companies that interested her first.

Around two o'clock her stomach rumbled to let her know that she had not eaten lunch. She had not realized it was so late and slipped out of the library for a quick bite to eat, eager to resume her research. So far she had narrowed the list of companies she would like to work for down to three, including Malfoy Industries.

When she returned to the library, she dove back into her research. She lost complete track of time as she poured through the various documents on each company. She made a list of pros and cons for each, hoping to make her decision easier.

She was disturbed from her analysis when the now familiar voice of Lucius Malfoy said, "Mrs. Weasley, we meet again."

For some reason she was not at all surprised to see him. She looked up at him and replied, "So we do."

He took the seat across from hers and with a look of concern on his face, he asked, "Are you well?"

"What?" she asked, surprised by his question.

"I'm sorry to be so forward. You just look..." he trailed off, clearly unable to find the right words.

She was pretty sure she knew what he was thinking and was surprised that it was so obvious to a casual acquaintance. "Same old stress," she replied nonchalantly.

"Have you perhaps considered taking a vacation? I know that I find it quite refreshing and reinvigorating to spend time in a relaxing setting," he suggested.

Hermione thought about it and realized that it had been more than two years since she and Ron had taken a vacation. It was very difficult for them to be able to find a time that was convenient for them both be away from work. After a few moments consideration, she replied, "You know, that's a good idea."

He smiled warmly. "My pleasure." He glanced down at the documents she had on the table. Arching an eyebrow, he picked one of them up, one that happened to be about his holdings. "Doing a little job research?"

She blushed and snatched the parchment from his hand. "Just a little something to occupy me on my day off," she replied not wanting to draw attention to the fact that she had taken his suggestion.

"You do know that if you have questions about my holdings, I would be the best person to ask, don't you? I would be more than happy to answer any questions you might have over tea," he offered politely.

She was not sure what to make of his offer. It was, of course, the truth. Reports could only tell you so much about a company and at some point she would have interview for a job. And since his companies were on the short list of places she was thinking of interviewing, it made sense for her to accept his offer. "So long as you are clear that this is not a job interview," she stated.

He looked surprised. "My dear, have I led you to believe this was anything other than a simple opportunity to enquire after my business?"

"No, but you are the one who suggested that I look for other employment," she replied cautiously.

"That is true, but I was merely noticing the toll your current job seemed to be taking on you. You are a young woman who should not be carrying the weight of world on her shoulders it really isn't becoming." He paused a moment before continuing. "I will say I am flattered that you are considering my company. Now, shall we take some tea and I'll answer your questions?"

She was still slightly suspicious of him, but she knew it was the best way to learn about his company. After neatly stacking the magazines to be refilled by the librarians, she rose to her feet. "I'm ready."

They spent an hour at the French bakery with her asking him questions and taking notes. When they finished, Hermione felt like she had a much better grasp as to what Malfoy Industries was about. She could not help but think that he was selling his company to her, but he was always so eloquent that it was hard for her to be sure. Once she had all the information she wanted, she thanked him and excused herself so that she could go home and prepare for dinner.

By the time Ron returned from work, she was ready, having put the effort into taming her hair and actually using makeup. Taking one last look at herself in the mirror, she actually felt pretty, though she knew that the dark circles and sallow skin were still present.

When Ron walked in the door, he stopped when he saw her. "Hermione? You look wonderful!" he said as he smiled broadly.

She beamed at him. "Thank you."

"Give me a few minutes to change," he said as he hurried into the bedroom.

Once he was changed into nice robes, he hooked his arm in hers and asked, "Ready?"

Realizing he was going to Side-Along Apparate her somewhere, she replied, "Ready." After the sickening twisting of her stomach subsided, she opened her eyes and realized they were in front of one of the best wizarding restaurants in London. "Oh, Ron!"

He smiled proudly. "It was the least I could do."

Dinner was pleasant and conversation did not once stray to work or having a family. Over desert she said, "I've been thinking... it's been a long time since we've taken a vacation. I think we should take a break and get away from Britain."

Ron put his fork down and his smile evaporated. "This really isn't a good time, Hermione. The office is busy and all vacations have been cancelled. Maybe if you can wait a couple of months..."

She sighed. "I really think I need to get away for a while. The day off was nice, but while I'm still here, it's too tempting to do something work related. I need something more."

Ron contemplated her for a few moments. "I tell you what, how about I come with you for the weekend, then you can have the week to relax on your own, and I'll try to duck out early on Friday?"

She had hoped for time with Ron, but upon contemplation, she began to think that maybe it was best if she was by herself for a little while to become one with her thoughts. "That might be a good idea. Are you sure though?"

He reached across the table and placed his hand on hers. "Of course I am. I can tell that you need to get away. And you've been working so hard lately that it's not like you've really been here anyway."

She blushed a little as she realized that he was right, that she had been far too engrossed with her work. "I'll look for someplace nice I'm thinking someplace tropical."

He smiled warmly at her. "Whatever makes you happy," he said softly.

That night was a wonderful night for Ron and Hermione. There had been no fighting, no work, nothing to come between them. She was reminded why she had married Ron. She fell asleep in his arms, feeling happier than she had in quite some time.

A/N: As always many thanks to beawesley2 for all her assistance along with Nicole and Ruth. And many thanks to all those who have enjoyed the story enough to leave reviews. It really provides the motivation to get the final bit of the story polished up.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 29

Lucius has realized that as one of the best and brightest, Hermione should be working for one of his companies.

Chapter 4

Lucius left his meeting with Hermione feeling quite confident that she would come work for him. He had talked at length about the various holdings he had and had also probed her to find out where her interests lie. He had quite enjoyed their conversation and overall it had been a very enjoyable afternoon. With the meticulous research she was carrying out, she had confirmed his belief that she would be a very valuable employee.

Even though it might not have been strictly necessary, he had also poured on the charm, doing his best to ensure that she realized his company was the best place for someone of her considerable talent, subtly flirting with her to make her feel important. He had enjoyed watching her reaction to the attention he lavished upon her. She had seemed quite flattered by the positive attention he had given her, making him wonder about her personal life.

Of course, he told himself, it was *noreal* concern of his what the state her private life was. But then again he also knew how troubles at home could affect someone's job performance. He would not change his decision to hire her based on her personal life, but it was obviously to his advantage and hers for her to solve any personal problems.

He knew that no other company in Britain could offer her the diversity and challenges that his could. He had to admit that he was enjoying how difficult she was making it. Most people who were offered a job at his company would accept the interview without question. In fact, he almost never interacted with any of the new potential employees. But Hermione was different. He knew she had to be convinced it was in her best interest to work for him, to overcome their dark past, and he most definitely enjoyed the challenge.

This diversion was exactly the sort of thing he needed to relieve the tediousness of the day to day running of a large commercial empire. Of course he was not involved with every decision, having selected the best and brightest to run the individual holdings, but he required reports on what each branch was doing for his review.

Since it was only mid-afternoon, he decided to return to the office to peruse correspondence before his weekly dinner with Connor Greengrass. The two of them had never really been close at Hogwarts since Connor had been three years behind Lucius, but they had gotten on well enough. Once Draco had become serious with Astoria, the two men had formed a strong friendship.

Lucius had relied heavily on that friendship in the wake of Narcissa's illness. Connor had been able to keep him focused on the present and remind him that life was still worth living. For the last two years, Connor had been gently urging him to enjoy everything that life had to offer and begin dating again.

It was a prospect that did not appeal to Lucius. There were quite a few pureblood widows who he knew were salivating at the chance to land him. Some of them were bolder than others in flaunting their desires, and he was sure that once he resumed dating a number of them would turn quite brazen. Truthfully he was not interested in any of them. He was almost positive all they were interested in was becoming the next Mrs. Malfoy and having access to the money and the power that would come with it and were not at all interested in being his partner.

Once he decided to date, he would be very selective and hopefully choose the woman who was destined to be his wife, someone who would feel about him the way Narcissa had. She had really and truly loved him, and he had loved her. For now, he had not found that witch, not that he was really looking. He wasn't sure what he was waiting for, he just had not felt motivated to enter the dating scene.

After spending two hours going through the latest correspondence and reports and making comments for his secretary, he left the office to meet Connor at his private club. It had long ago become their habit to meet for dinner on Mondays. It had started at the club as a way to get Lucius out of the manor and around others, and they had never changed it.

Connor was waiting for him, martini in hand. Lucius took his seat and ordered his usual Scotch. "How is Felicia?" he asked cordially.

"She's doing well and sends her regards."

Lucius could tell there was something more Connor wanted to say. "And?" he prompted.

Connor set his drink down. "She'd like to have you over for dinner Friday."

Lucius immediately felt on guard. "And who else will be in attendance?" Felicia had taken to heart Narcissa's desire that Lucius not spend the rest of his life alone and often held impromptu dinners with someone she thought was a suitable pairing.

Connor set his drink down and folded his hands on the table. "Lucius, it's been three years. You should at least try to get to know some other witches. It's hard to find your match if you aren't out in the social scene."

It was an old discussion, and Lucius knew that Connor did it out of concern. "I do not want ~~to~~ the social scene." He took a drink. "I can think of no less than ten middle-age witches who would throw themselves all over me in a very embarrassing manner if they believed I was interested in dating." At the last dinner Felicia had hosted, he had experienced just that. Amanda Belby had flirted rather shamelessly with him, clearly not willing to accept his lack of interest. She had even *invited* herself back to his manor as the evening was wrapping up.

"You don't know that," Connor said defensively.

Lucius upended his Scotch and ordered another with a wave of his hand. "No? Have you forgotten the last dinner already? Though I cannot blame you, as I have tried to repress that memory. There is a very good reason I limit my appearances at social functions." He wanted to choose the witch and did not want her choosing him.

Connor sighed. Changing subjects, he asked, "So, do you have something big planned in the business world? I noticed you had a decided spring in your step this evening, or perhaps you have found that special witch?" he asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"Now, Connor, you know that I couldn't tell you if it was something business related and that you would be the first to know if I had found someone. But if you must know, I am in the process of stealing away some more talent from the Ministry," he said deviously as he swirled his drink, admiring the amber liquid.

"I think you need a better hobby," Connor said pointedly.

Lucius grinned. "Oh come now, I thought you would find my actions noble that I would rescue our poor misguided youth from the drudgery of working at the Ministry," he said magnanimously.

"Oh, yes, very noble," Connor replied sarcastically. "You *rescue* them and increase your profits." Both men shared a laugh. Connor continued somberly, "Seriously, my friend, there is more to life than business. Perhaps if you put the sort of effort into your personal life that you put into your professional..."

While Lucius did not appreciate the implication, he knew it was the truth. If he put half the time into finding someone to share his life with that he had put into recruiting Hermione... He started to wonder if his pursuing her to work for him was in part because she was married. He could enjoy the chase because there was no chance of commitment.

"Lucius?" Connor asked.

"I'm sorry. Lost in thought," he said before taking a draught of his Scotch.

Connor leaned forward. "So is there someone you are considering, someone who would occupy your thoughts like that?" he asked eagerly.

"Not at all," he replied simply. "Though it would be good if there was." He forced a smile. It was no good thinking of Hermione that way. She was married, and he would not invite the scandal of being a home wrecker. Even if there would be no scandal, he still believed in the sanctity of marriage vows, though some of his contemporaries did not share that viewpoint.

"Have you thought about a fling?" Connor asked casually as they started their meal.

"A fling?" Lucius asked incredulously. He could not believe his closest friend had suggested something so frivolous and out of character.

"Why not? You're single and in the prime of your life. I think many men our age would love to have a fling," Connor pointed out.

"I think many men our age have had a fling," Lucius replied glibly and they both laughed at his joke.

Connor shrugged. "It might be a good way to ease back into the dating scene."

"The only problem with that is the fact I am fairly well known," Lucius pointed out as he waved his fork at Connor.

"Go somewhere else. Someone as handsome as you should have no problem finding a willing witch." Connor grinned slyly.

Lucius had to admit that perhaps Connor had a point. An anonymous fling might feel good, reassure him that he still had it. Of course, that sort of behavior was not in his nature, not even before he had married, but perhaps it was time for a change, and a change of scenery. An anonymous fling could be quite liberating and exactly what he needed.

The rest of the meal was spent on more mundane topics of conversation such as politics, weather and business generalities - nothing of any real importance and more to fill the dead space while they were eating. It was all very much part of their routine.

When Lucius returned home, he poured himself a Scotch and stared into the fire, losing himself to thoughts stirred up by Connor's observations. Yes, a fling might be exactly what he needed. Something that was pure lust with no strings attached. Unfortunately, his thoughts then drifted to Hermione the one woman he could not have.

As he thought about her, he realized that he had been flirting rather heavily with her when he had been trying to convince her to come work for him. He had tried to rationalize that it was in order to earn her confidence and put her at ease, but as he thought more and more about her, he knew that it was something more. She was exactly the type of witch he wanted. She was bright, driven and most importantly someone who did not care about his money. She would see him for who he was and not the size of his vault.

Downing his Scotch, he poured himself another and quickly downed that, trying to drown out the thoughts of Hermione. She was married. To Weasley. ~~To~~ *Weasley!* While he was no expert on the young man, he did know that Weasley was not her intellectual equal and given her behavior that afternoon, Weasley did not even seem to value what he had.

Perhaps her job stress was not the only stress in her life. He had actually been surprised to learn that she was working for the Ministry. Most young, married witches started families, and she had clearly not done so. He began to wonder if there was a reason for that that did not involve the stress at her job. After all, she could have easily quit her job and started family, yet she was sticking it out. And now he nearly had her convinced to come work for him. Could there be unrest in her marriage?

He downed a fourth glass of Scotch that evening. "It's a foolish fantasy, old man," he admonished as he got unsteadily to his feet, starting to feel the effects of all the alcohol. Taking hold of his chair, he waited for the room to stop spinning. Once it was reasonably stable, he aimed for the door only run squarely into the door frame. It took him quite some time to make it to his room. At first he bounced off the walls until he just settled for leaning against it as he shuffled down the hall and up the stairs.

When he made it to his room, he tried to take his shoe off, but collapsed to his bed and decided he was quite comfortable before passing out.

The next morning Lucius awoke to raging headache and the nausea that accompanied a hangover. He noticed that he was under the covers and his nightclothes. Clearly the house-elves had looked after him. He sat up and immediately regretted it. Quietly he said, "Katta."

"Yes, master?" the house-elf replied exuberantly as it popped into his bed chambers.

He winced and grabbed at his head. "Quietly," he chided and watched the elf's ears dip at being chastised. "Bring me something for a hangover," he instructed.

Katta bowed before disappearing with a crack.

He winced at the noise house-elves created when Apparating, but he knew there was little to be done about that and braced for his servant's return, which was only about a minute later. He shooed her outside his bed chambers so that he did not have to hear that thundering crack again.

He downed the vile concoction as quickly as he could. As clarity returned, he could not believe that he had drunk so much. The wine had flowed freely at dinner, and when combined with copious amounts of Scotch he had drunk both before and after dinner, it had been too much. It was very unlike him to get drunk. He prided himself on maintaining control. At least he was reasonably sure that he had not appeared drunk in public since he had made it safely home.

He got to his feet and shuffled to the bathroom, feeling better, but not yet one hundred percent.

Hermione. He had been thinking about Hermione last night. He wanted to blame Connor for suggesting that he start dating again, but he knew that would not be fair since he had been thinking about her quite a bit the last few weeks, and not just as a new employee.

As he showered, he forced himself to push her from his mind. There was nothing to be done. Lucius might not have the strongest morals in the wizarding world, but he did believe in the sanctity of marriage, and he would not have her cheat on her husband no matter how much he believed she deserved someone better.

After drying off, he stared at himself in the bathroom mirror. He still looked good. He had a few wrinkles, but they made him look distinguished not old. And unlike some of his contemporaries he had not let himself go physically. No, he was every bit the fine catch he had been thirty years ago when he had wooed Narcissa.

Thirty years. It was such a long time ago, more than half his lifetime. That was the real reason he had not started dating. When he had married Narcissa, it had been for the rest of his life. He always imagined they would grow old together. Yes, he had flirted with other witches over the years, but it had always been harmless. Narcissa had been aware he did it and did not mind. In fact, she appreciated that he had also flirted with her.

But dating was much more than flirting. Dating was exposing yourself, your emotions to another person and hoping for their approval. As Lucius Malfoy he basically had his choice of eligible witches, or did he? Did he fear rejection and was that why he was avoiding dating?

Whatever trepidations he had about that, it was finally time for him to move on with his life and quit hiding in the past.

And a fling seemed the perfect way to do that.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 29

Hermione prepares to take her first vacation in ages in an attempt to resurrect her relationship with Ron and contemplate whether she still wants to work for the Ministry.

Chapter 5

As soon as she returned to work, Hermione put in for vacation the following week. It was quickly approved, not that she was surprised at this point. She presumed that Ron had told his father that Hermione needed a vacation, and he had worked with her boss to ensure she could get the time off. She then spent her breaks trying to decide where it was she wanted to go, sorting through dozens of brochures as she learned about the various wizarding resorts. While she had normally let Ron handle all the travel arrangements in the past, this time she wanted to select a suitably remote and romantic location. Something he tended not to take into account when picking a destination.

She had considered just choosing a Muggle resort, but she knew that Ron would not feel comfortable there, and truthfully, she had grown used to living in the magical world.

By the time Thursday arrived, she still had not settled on a place, and she knew she had to make decision unless she wanted to just randomly Apparate places something that would require her choosing a location with a lot of wizarding destinations, not something she wanted to do. Besides, she wanted some place isolated and not crowded.

During her lunch break she flipped through the brochures she had gotten from the travel agent, making two piles. After ruling out more than half of the places, she once again sorted through the brochures until she had narrowed it down to three choices: Mediterranean France, the Bahamas and Egypt. Unable to really decide which one would be better than the other, tired of her indecision, she tore three strips off a piece of parchment and wrote the location of each on one strip before folding them all up exactly the same way. She then took her empty mug, put the strips in and shook it up before selecting one.

She was excited as she unfolded the piece of parchment. On it was her vacation destination, and she could return to the travel agent in just a few moments to book her travel and tell Ron about it tonight. On the parchment was 'Bahamas'. This one had the appeal of being on a private island owned by the resort. She wouldn't have to worry about dealing with Muggles or a lot of other wizarding tourists like she would have in France or Egypt.

Turning to her office mate, she said, "Phil, I'm going to call it a day."

"Sure thing," he replied. "Have a good evening."

"Thanks. You too," she replied as she left. She had a spring in her step as she walked to the lift. She saw Arthur there when the doors opened. "Good afternoon!" she said cheerfully.

"Nice to see you looking so chipper and you aren't even on vacation yet."

The both laughed at his comment. "I think it's just the idea of actually taking a vacation that's making me happy. I might just float away when I get there."

"So where have you decided on? Ron told me you were having trouble narrowing the choices down."

"I was, but I ended up just choosing someplace I liked at random."

"And that would be...?" he prompted.

She thought about telling him, but then she determined that she owed it to Ron to tell him first. "I'll send a postcard when I get there." She smiled. "I'd like to tell Ron first."

"Perfectly understandable. I do hope you will have a good time," he told her when the doors opened on the main floor.

"I'm sure I will," she replied before the doors closed. She then queued up to Disapparate, eager to finalize her travel plans. She knew that Floo travel or a Portkey would be involved. She was not sure which was worse. That would be the hardest decision for her to make. Perhaps she should keep with the random decision making and flip a coin for it.

When she walked in the door, Rose Monroe, the travel agent, greeted her brightly, "Mrs. Weasley! Have you finally made your decision?"

Hermione took the seat across from Rose's desk. "Indeed I have," she said smartly as she placed the brochure on the desk.

Rose smiled brightly. "Ah! Wonderful choice. I've been there myself and it is a wonderful place. Let me see to your reservation." Rose went over to a small fireplace located at chest level clearly designed for Floo communication.

Hermione flipped through the brochure once more while she waited for Rose's head to return. After a few minutes, Rose pulled her head out of the fire and looked over at Hermione, her bright smile gone. "I have good news and bad news. The good news is I can get you a wonderful discount on the rate, but you will have to wait until Monday to depart. They don't have any availabilities this weekend."

Hermione thought about her other two finalists, but since she had left the office, she had had her heart set on this resort. "Monday will be fine," she finally replied and Rose's head popped back into the fire.

When Rose emerged this time, she had a piece of parchment in her hand. Reaching across the desk, she handed it to Hermione, who took it and began perusing it. "That is your confirmation. It's an all inclusive, food and tours are covered, so there won't be any need for Galleons when you get there unless you plan doing some shopping."

Hermione smiled brightly. "Thank you."

Rose pulled a form out of her drawer and grabbed her quill. "I presume you would like to pay for this with a transfer from Gringotts?"

Hermione tried not to twitch at the mention of the bank and all it implied. "Yes, please," she replied as pleasantly as she could. After a few moments, Rose passed her a document. Hermione read it over, filled in the pertinent information and signed it. Once it was signed, Rose cast a binding charm on it that would keep anyone from altering the document.

"That's it! Enjoy your vacation," Rose said cheerfully as she offered Hermione her hand.

"I hope to and thank you for helping with this," she replied as she rose to her feet.

"My pleasure."

Hermione tucked the reservation into her pocket and headed for home. She had hoped to have two weekends with Ron, but one was better than none. And this would give her plenty of time to pack and to do any shopping for clothes she would need in such a warm environment since her wardrobe was geared for cooler British weather.

When Monday finally arrived, Hermione could not be happier. The weekend had seemed especially tense, and she could not understand why. Yes, they had planned on going away and that plan had changed abruptly, but that shouldn't have been enough to account for the tension between the two of them. She had the feeling that Ron had something he wanted to tell her, but for some reason he did not seem comfortable doing so at home.

She had lessened the tension a bit by going out to purchase a few new outfits. Well, it had not exactly lessened the tension, but she had removed herself from the situation and was able to relax a few hours while she was away.

Ron had left for work that morning as though everything was normal, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek before leaving, which surprised Hermione. For some reason she had expected him to be apprehensive about her spending the week alone at the resort, or at the very least apologetic that he could not be there with her, but he had acted like it was no different than them being separated for the work day.

Due to the time difference, her Floo time was not until late afternoon. Her bag was sitting by the fireplace, and she was attempting to read a book while checking the clock every couple of minutes, willing time to pass a little more quickly.

Finally her Floo time arrived, and she took hold of her bag. After throwing a pinch of Floo powder into the fire, she said quite clearly, "Merlin's Cove, Bahamas," before walking into the green flames and feeling the extreme disorientation of a long Floo journey. She still was undecided whether this was worse than a Portkey.

Moments later she stepped out of an opulent fireplace that even though it was in the tropics, looked like it belonged there. Once she overcame the dizziness, she noticed the lobby of the hotel was even more magnificent than it had looked in the brochure. It truly was a tropical paradise. She only wished that Ron had arrived with her.

A house-elf was almost immediately at her side, and she jumped slightly. She should not have been surprised the resort utilized house elves. "Miss, Eppel will be taking your bag," it said subserviently.

She could feel herself getting riled up thinking of house-elf equality, and she forced herself to remember that she was on vacation and any crusade for house-elf equality could wait. "Of course," she finally replied simply and handed the house elf her bag. It immediately disappeared with a pop.

When she walked up to the front desk a friendly wizard dressed in light-weight linen robes greeted her. "Good morning, Mrs. Weasley. I hope that your journey was pleasant."

"As pleasant as Floo travel ever is," she replied honestly, still a bit overwhelmed by the resort.

"It is rather disorienting Flooing over long distances," he replied sympathetically before sliding a key onto the desk. "You are in Bungalow Fourteen; Eppel can guide you," he offered.

"I think I'd like to find it on my own, thank you," she replied, deciding she could at least minimize her use of house-elves.

If he was surprised by her request, he did not show it and smiled pleasantly. "Of course. You proceed out that door," he pointed off to her right, "and follow the signs. In your room you will find your luggage and a schedule of activities offered. Everything is included, though there are several activities where we do ask you make a reservation as they can be quite popular. Directions on how to do so are in the pamphlet. If you need anything, please do not hesitate to ask. We are here to ensure you have a pleasant stay."

"Thank you," she replied pleasantly. As she walked outside, she was struck by how different the weather was here compared to London. She was definitely overdressed. Her first order of business would be change into more appropriate attire and then take a look at what the resort had to offer. She was strongly leaning towards taking a book down to the beach, but she might change her mind.

It did not take Hermione long to settle into her room. Again it seemed as though the brochure did not do it justice. There was a sitting area with a sofa and two chairs surrounding a coffee table, a small dining area for two, and in the bedroom a very large bed, naturally all in the tropical style. The palm trees on the duvet even swayed as

though in a gentle breeze. A sea breeze ruffled the gauzy white curtains and brought the seductive scent of the sea air into the room. Outside was a lushly landscaped veranda with two chairs and a table. She knew that Ron was busy with work, but she really wished they could be enjoying this moment together. In that case, she probably would have decided that there was no need to leave the room immediately.

Continuing her exploration of the bungalow, she was in awe of the bath, which had a number of taps to rival those in the Prefect's bathroom, and the tub was definitely large enough for two. She thought that would be the perfect way for her and Ron to end their first day together. But that was not until Friday, so she pushed Ron's absence from her mind and focused on unpacking. Hopefully he would enjoy it here, and they could come back at a time when they could both get the week off from work.

Once she had finished unpacking, she perused the activity list. She saw many interesting activities and was pleased to notice that several of them were also offered on the weekend when she and Ron could enjoy them together. Looking at all there was to do only made her miss him more. She decided the best thing to do to relax was lounge at the beach and enjoy a good book so she could take her mind off being alone. She would take a better look at the brochure after she had had some time to unwind and then choose some activities she would enjoy on her own.

After changing into her swimsuit and pulling her wrap around her waist, she left the bungalow for the beach.

The beach was spacious enough that she noticed the paired lounge chairs were placed far enough apart to afford each person or couple some privacy. The sand was pristine white and cool enough to the touch that she presumed magic was being used to keep it comfortable for the guests. Times like these she really loved magic. She could remember being miserable as a child at the beach in Majorca, complaining to her parents about the sand being too hot and the water too cold. She selected a chair a short ways from where she entered the beach, reasoning that one chair was just as good as the next.

As soon as she settled into her seat, a house-elf popped next to her. "Can, Eppel be getting Miss anything to drink or eat?" the elf asked obsequiously.

For a moment she thought of sending him away, but she reasoned that she was on vacation and the house-elves here were obviously well treated, all wearing dazzlingly cleaned and pressed tea towels and so eager to help, so she could put aside her concerns for house-elf equality for a week. "Oh, I don't know, something fruity and tropical. You decide."

The elf got a very troubled look on his face and wrung his hands nervously. "Please, Miss, Eppel is needing to know what item you want. Eppel is not qualified to make a decision for a witch."

She closed her eyes and slowly counted. By the time she got to ten, she thought she had a solution. "I'll have the sixth drink on the menu," she said.

"But Miss doesn't know what it is," the house-elf protested.

"That's alright," she replied. "I like surprises." She generally did not, but in this case, she knew it was likely to get the elf to acquiesce to her request.

After a few very long seconds, Eppel bowed his head. "Yes, Miss. Eppel will return presently," he replied before popping away.

She contemplated opening her book, but she knew that it would only be a few seconds before he returned with her drink, so she just stared out at the water, watching the waves crash on the shore, reflecting on how soothing that process was.

As expected Eppel returned very quickly. The drink was a little frillier than she had expected, but it did look sufficiently tropical.

"If Miss is not liking the drink, Eppel will bring a new one," the elf said, clearly still nervous about the idea that she had not requested a specific drink.

"I'm sure it will be fine, Eppel. Thank you," she replied politely.

Eppel squeaked and blushed in embarrassment before popping away. She knew that house-elves were not used to being thanked. Just because she was on vacation and had decided not to question the use of house-elves did not mean that she would not remain polite to them. Carefully she took a sip of the drink, evaluating it. It was curiously light and refreshing, and she thought she might have to order a second one.

Now that she was alone, she settled into her chair and opened her book. This was one of the few times in her life where she had allowed herself to just read a book that was fiction. Ginny had lent her this one and Hermione was interested to see what sort of book Ginny had recommended. Based on the cover, she thought it was likely some sort of romance novel with a clichéd plot, but that was exactly what she needed to relax.

It did not take long for Hermione to become caught up in the heroine's plight, and she completely lost track of time. She would have been content to sit on the beach reading for the rest of the afternoon, but she was disturbed from her fantasy world.

"My goodness! Mrs. Weasley, is that you?" asked a stunned voice from in front of her.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 29

Hermione runs into the most unexpected person while vacationing in the Bahamas.

Chapter 6

Hermione's jaw dropped a little when she saw Lucius Malfoy. He had clearly just come from a swim in the ocean as his hair hung in a wet, blonde curtain and water still glistened on his skin. She also could not help staring at his muscular chest and the water droplets glistening in the sun the man definitely took care of himself, and she could not help but admire his well fit physique.

Finally gaining control of her senses, she replied, "Mr. Malfoy, what a surprise to see you here." She was also set a little bit on edge that he should be at the same resort she was, and if it hadn't been for her discretion she'd have thought it quite a coincidence.

He sat on the edge of the seat next to hers. "Indeed. When I had mentioned a vacation to you, I had no idea you would take one so quickly." He looked around and then asked, "And where might Mr. Weasley be?"

"Ron couldn't get away from work, but he'll be here on Friday," she replied simply, feeling a little uncomfortable about revealing that sort of information.

"A pity. So many of the activities here are more enjoyable if you have a partner," he replied sadly.

Before they could dwell on that somber subject any longer, Eppel returned, carrying a neatly folded towel. "For Mr. Malfoy, sir. Can Eppel be getting you any refreshment, sir?"

After taking the towel, he looked at her drink. "I'll have one of those." Noticing hers was almost empty, he asked her, "Would you care for another?"

She was torn between returning to her bungalow and finding something to do that did not involve Malfoy or staying and enjoying the beach and perhaps a little conversation with him. Resolving not to be a hermit this week, she replied, "Yes, I'll have another."

After the elf popped away, he said, "I find they make some of the best drinks here, don't you?" as he started to dry off from his swim.

"I wouldn't know. I just got here, and that's the first drink I've had," she said simply while trying not to stare too much as he dried himself.

"Ah, then there is so much for you to see here. I would be more than happy to give you a tour of the resort once Eppel returns with our drinks. I have been here numerous times," he offered cordially.

She arched an eyebrow in surprise at the fact that he not only knew the house-elf's name, but had used it. Once she recovered from that shock, she mulled his offer over. She really could not see any harm in taking him up on his proposal. While the hotel brochure was quite detailed, it was still just a brochure. "I'd like that."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Eppel returned and deposited the two drinks before vanishing again.

Malfoy rose to his feet leaving the towel behind. "Well, then, my dear, shall we walk?" He offered her his hand to help her get up from the chair.

She glanced at his offered hand. She did not need the assistance, but it felt rude to decline. She smiled cordially at him as he helped her to her feet. If he noticed her hesitation, he didn't show it.

"I'm sure that you have already noticed that the sand is charmed to keep it comfortable to the touch."

"Indeed I had. I wish I had known about that sort of thing growing up," she replied, glancing up at him.

He chuckled softly at her comment. "To my knowledge, the company that runs this resort is the only one to do so. I am told it is an incredibly difficult charm to maintain over a whole beach, and they are quite tight lipped about discussing it."

"That makes sense to me, though I don't recall seeing it mentioned in the brochure." She had gone over every detail in all the brochures, and she surely would have remembered something like that.

"They prefer not to advertise it directly as a way of keeping some from trying to divine the secret, instead they prefer word of it to travel from person to person. Though from time to time they do catch a spy from a competing resort trying to decipher the magic behind the cool sand. Now then, if we get off the beach and move into the heart of the resort, the tour can begin in earnest."

They spent the next hour walking around the resort as he showed her the various areas. He told her which restaurants he preferred and which activities were worth the time and which he did not find quite as enjoyable. She almost felt as though she had a personal concierge. Though she could not imagine a hotel concierge walking around with a guest while wearing nothing more than his swim trunks. And that lack of clothing did not seem to bother Lucius in the least, and she made a concerted effort not to stare at his physique while they were walking around the resort as her gaze swept over, across and behind him, taking in everything around her.

Overall, she was very pleased with her choice of resorts, and Lucius put her at ease when he mentioned that he had been there since Wednesday. That meant that there was no way that he could be following her since she had not made her reservations until Thursday, it was a just a strange coincidence that they were both at this resort.

She was startled when he announced, "Well, then. That concludes the tour. I hope you have found it useful."

"Oh, I have," she replied enthusiastically, a little sad the tour was over as she had enjoyed his company. However, he had shown her places that she would have been unlikely to find on her own. There were many little secret gardens off the main paths, and many of those entrances were obscured through landscaping so that unless you knew it was there, you wouldn't find it.

He considered her for a few moments before asking, "I hope this won't seem too forward, but I always find dinner more enjoyable when I am dining with someone else, and I wondered if you might be interested in joining me for dinner tonight?"

To say she was surprised by the invitation was an understatement. It was the last thing she had expected. After all, they really did not know each other well and dinner was far more personal than sharing a cup of tea. And then she had to wonder what people would say about the two of them together especially since they were both reasonably famous in the wizarding world.

As though he could read her mind, he replied, "This is the sort of resort that values its patrons' privacy, if you hadn't noticed that already."

Deciding that she really did not want to eat alone, at least not dinner, she replied, "It would be nice to have the company."

"Excellent," he replied as he smiled at her. "I'll come by your bungalow at seven."

"That sounds fine." She started to turn to walk away, when it occurred to her she did not know what she should wear. After all, he had mentioned that various restaurants had different dress standards. "Er, what should I wear? I don't want under or overdress."

"If you have some sort of nice dress, nothing too formal," he replied.

She knew she had exactly the right thing to wear. "Great. See you at seven." She started to walk away again when she realized that she had never told Malfoy where she was staying. "I'm in Bungalow Fourteen," she said as she turned back to face him.

"Thank you. See you then, Mrs. Weasley," he said warmly before turning towards his own bungalow.

As she walked back to her bungalow to prepare for dinner, she still marveled at how affable Malfoy was being. She knew that she had preached change was possible for everyone to Ron and Harry, but to encounter it firsthand like this was still a bit jarring. He had not said one disparaging thing about Muggles or Muggle-borns and was voluntarily spending time with her.

As she luxuriated in the bath, she contemplated that it really might not be that bad working for him. Of course, she would not be working directly for him, but it still might not be that bad. She started thinking about what Ron would say about that and then pushed it out of her mind when she realized it was stressing her out and ruining her good mood.

Once she finished her bath, she looked at her hair. She pulled it back with her hand and thought of just putting it up, but then she thought that would look too formal. But leaving it as it was not much of an option either given how unruly it was. Checking the clock, she saw that she had plenty of time until dinner to try to tame it.

After half an hour, she admired her work in the mirror. Her hair looked wonderful. It was a shame that it required so much work each time or she might do this more often. Of course, the rest of her was another story. Her face still looked gaunt and the dark circles under eyes had not vanished. A little creative application of cosmetics, and she was feeling pretty good about herself.

Once her dress was on, she admired the finished look in the mirror. "He's a lucky chap," chirped the mirror.

Still startled by talking mirrors, Hermione jumped. "What was that?" she asked to make sure she had heard the mirror correctly.

"I said he's a lucky chap. You polished up quite nicely indeed." It sounded proud about how good she looked, as if it deserved credit.

She could not help blushing. "I did this for myself," she replied defensively.

"Whatever you say, dearie," it replied back to her.

Hermione stormed out of the bathroom. She had done this for herself. Part of her vacation was to take care of herself, something she tended to neglect. And making herself look her best was part of that. She was not doing it to impress Malfoy was she?

"That's preposterous," she said to no one in particular. About the time she realized she was talking to herself, there was a knock at the door. Looking at the clock, she saw that it was seven o'clock, so that must be Malfoy.

Smoothing her skirt one last time, she went to open the door. Before she could say anything, he said, "Good evening, Mrs. Weasley. If I may say so, you look quite lovely."

She beamed at him, grateful that he had noticed. "Thank you. And I think that we don't need to be so formal, so could you please call me Hermione?" There was no need to draw further attention with the use of last names. She noticed that he was wearing linen trousers and a short sleeved shirt, something that seemed out of place when she was used to him wearing his neatly tailored and more formal robes. Obviously those were unsuited to the climate here as her clothes were, so it made sense he would wear something more tropical.

"Only if you will call me Lucius," he replied, offering her his elbow.

She hesitated, her gaze flicking from his face to his arm and back, unsure about the implications of taking his arm. This was not a date, just two people dining together, but then not to take his arm would be rude on her part. "Thank you, Lucius," she replied as she gently placed her hand and inhaled deeply.

It was not dark yet, though the sun was starting to set. There were enough clouds in the sky that it looked like they would get a rather spectacular sunset. "M...mm..." she started to say, then halted. It seemed odd calling him by his first name, but if they were to have dinner, it would be too cumbersome to continually call him 'Mr. Malfoy'. "Lovely evening," she said as he led her down the resort's winding paths.

"Indeed it is. The weather this time of year is generally good. Too much later and you risk hurricanes, though the resort does have a wonderful hurricane contingency plan so that your vacation is not entirely ruined by such events."

"Why am I not surprised," she replied, laughing softly at his knowledge of the resort.

Finally they reached their destination. "Here we are!" he announced proudly. "The Twelve Palms. While not the most formal, this is by far my favorite place to eat, and I think you'll see why."

He led her to the host stand, and she got her first good glimpse of the restaurant. At first she could only see a couple of tables, but upon closer examination, she thought she detected more dining areas between the lush planters and towering palms.

"It's amazing," she said as the host led them to their table. The landscaping was such that each table was provided with a fair amount of privacy so that it seemed like you were the only ones there. And of course the sky above, as this was an outdoor establishment, lent a wonderful sense of openness so you did not feel confined by all the greenery. As they were seated, Hermione noticed that down on the seating level, the sense of being in the jungle intensified. It was quite possibly the most beautiful restaurant she had ever been in.

Lucius ordered a two glasses of wine. "I hope you don't find that too presumptuous," he said after the host left.

"Not at all. I'm horrible at ordering wine. I keep thinking of putting more effort into learning about it, but it just never seems that important," she admitted.

"Wine can be one of the finer things of life. The proper wine can enhance a meal and bring forward flavors you never realized existed," he instructed.

She had, of course, known that, but she and Ron tended to eat simple foods, and they rarely had wine with their meals. "Oh, I know that. I've just never made it a priority. With both of us working... Well, let's just say that I don't cook anything extravagant."

Their wine arrived and Lucius picked up his glass, swirling the pale yellow liquid to release the aromas before inhaling deeply of its scent. "Even the simplest of meals can be enhanced with the right selection. For someone like you who excelled at Potions, learning about wines should be rather straightforward. But I have to warn you, it is one thing that you cannot entirely learn from a book. If you have time this week, I could help you begin your education. I could arrange a tasting session where you could try many different varietals."

She thought it sounded like a rather intimate activity, and she was not sure she wanted to spend that much time with Lucius. "I'll think about it."

Dinner was pleasant, and as each course was brought out, she did have to agree that his wine choices did indeed enhance the food. In fact, she was rather surprised at how the wine and the food could complement each other so well. Perhaps it would be worthwhile taking him up on his offer.

At the end of the evening, he escorted her back to her bungalow. "It was an enchanting evening, Hermione. Thank you for the pleasure of your company." Holding her hand, he bent down and kissed the back of it. "Good night," he said softly before turning away and heading towards his room.

After she closed the door, she leaned against it, her heart fluttering. She could not believe the wonderful evening she had just had. Her mind raced as quickly as her heart. She'd enjoyed the evening too much, yet everything had seemed as natural to her as breathing. Their conversation flowed, she'd laughed at his jokes, well humorous statements, openly confided in him her opinions and listened to his. She'd never felt this relaxed with anyone, even Ron. It was not right that she should have enjoyed dinner with Lucius as much as she had. He was not supposed to be that charming.

"Calm down, Hermione. It was a platonic dinner. There was nothing romantic happening; you are just imagining it." Or was she? After all, he had smiled warmly at her several times and casually touched her hand. He was a widower, and it wouldn't be out of the ordinary for him to court a woman. But she was a married woman happily wasn't she? Now she was starting to feel guilty about enjoying herself, especially when this vacation should be spent with Ron. But he wasn't here. He should've been there. If she could've had that sort of dinner with Ron on a regular basis, it would probably go a long way to improving their marital harmony.

It took a long time for Hermione to be able to fall asleep that night. She kept thinking about how much she had enjoyed spending the day with Lucius and how easy it had seemed compared to spending time with Ron. Time spent with Ron always required work, and conversations between them tended to seem forced for one person or the other. He loved Quidditch and could talk nonstop about the Chudley Canons whereas, while she did know the rules of the game, she really did not care that much about it. She had never really liked sports.

And Ron was not very interested in most of what she enjoyed. He could not understand her desire to read the latest academic journals and to discuss them. His thoughts were that since they were out of school and had secure jobs so there was no reason to keep learning about things that would not advance their careers. He also did not show much interest in museums or anything historical. It really limited the number of topics they both enjoyed discussing.

Lucius, on the other hand, was incredibly worldly, and because of his many business interests, he kept up on the latest journals and magical advancements. He had seamlessly shifted his conversation among topics quite varied, proving he was every bit as well read as she was. Though considering he had admitted to enjoying

spending time at the Great Library, she should not have been surprised.

This vacation was supposed to be an opportunity for her to reexamine her career, her life, but she had never imagined that she would be reexamining her relationship. That was exactly what she was doing right now.

A part of her considered checking out of the resort and finding someplace else to stay so that she would not have to worry about Lucius anymore, but then she would have to devise some reason to give Ron for her sudden change in where she was vacationing. Given the fact Ron had heard of this resort and remarked about how posh it was, she did not think that he would find her excuses convincing.

No. She would stay here and make the most of this vacation. It was a large resort, and she was sure that she could avoid Lucius for the rest of the week.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 29

Hermione continues her vacation, trying to find a way to relax despite having chosen the same destination as someone quite unexpected, Lucius Malfoy

A/N: First off, my apologies to everyone who was following this story for my extended absence. RL attacked and the muses fled to Tahiti (or perhaps Hawaii where I was able to locate them after the first child free vacation since the oldest war born 7 years ago). The muses are quite refreshed and my wonderful beta, beawesley, is graciously helping me out again. Now to pick up where we left off...

Chapter 7

Tuesday morning, she did the reef dive and marveled at the wide variety and sheer number of colorful fish. She had always wanted to go diving, though she had never envisioned it like this. Being a witch meant that you did not need all that cumbersome diving gear that a Muggle required. A simple Bubble Head Charm and to transfigure her feet into flippers was all that one needed. Now that she realized how easy it was, she knew that she would have to go diving again. Of course, this was not something that could be done around Muggles, but she was sure that the wizarding world had other diving spots that she could explore.

In the afternoon, she went on the sailing trip and was not really surprised to see Lucius was one of the other guests on the boat. For most of the cruise she avoided him, which was impressive since it was not that large a boat, and there were only about twenty guests in total on the voyage. But several people recognized her, and those who didn't did know of her by name as the famous friend of the world-renowned Harry Potter, and she found herself engaged in conversation through most of the trip, meeting some lovely couples. Near the end of the voyage, Lucius approached her as she was watching dolphins jump in the bow wake of the boat. He offered her a glass of wine, and they silently watched the frolicking dolphins.

They parted ways after the cruise, and she decided to take in the Luau for dinner. It did strike her as a little odd to be attending a Luau in the Bahamas, but it was an enjoyable evening and the others at her table provided interesting conversation.

Despite her earlier vow of trying to avoid Lucius, she found that it was harder than she thought. She had arrived at the horseback tour of the island on Wednesday and saw that Lucius had selected the same activity. Naturally he was an amazing equestrian, and he had a perfect seat: perfect balance, completely relaxed in the saddle, a light hand on the reins and seemed to have a flowing connection between himself and his horse, and he seemed to do so effortlessly. Hermione was jealous. Hermione's mother had been an equestrian most of her life, and had competed in show jumping as well as riding in the hunt whenever she could. Hermione had taken lessons since the age of seven, although she had never gained the level of competency of her mother, and they had gone riding every summer and winter holiday Hermione spent at home.

Through the countryside, under the dense canopy of the tropical hardwoods and flora and along the edge of the swash, a breathtakingly beautiful secluded sandy beach on the south shore. She saw hundreds of birds including flamingos, hummingbirds, and other small birds and waterfowl, as well as a few lizards, an iguana and some frogs.

The riders enjoyed a light lunch under an open tent set up on the beach, and she engaged Lucius in pleasant conversation and they rode back to the stables side by side.

She decided that trying to avoid him was pointless. He was good company, and she found that the solitude was not nearly as relaxing as she thought it might be. That afternoon she took Lucius up on his offer of wine tasting. When he escorted her to the room that had been provided, she was somewhat startled. She had not expected that it would be in the wine cellar, but now Lucius' tip to bring a jumper made perfect sense.

"Wine keeps best at fifty-five degrees," he informed her as she put her jumper on. "Most reds will need to warm a little before serving, but generally you don't want anything over sixty-five degrees. Sadly, many people don't realize that and serve reds at room temperature which does not optimize their flavor. Whites are served in the forties, with the temperature varying based on how robust the wine is."

She was also a bit surprised to see an elderly wizard waiting for them and not a house-elf. Other than the personnel at the desk and running the programs, she could not recall having seen a single human staff member.

"Monsieur Demeaux, a pleasure to see you again," Lucius said warmly and presented his hand to the elderly wizard.

"Monsieur Malfoy," the wizard replied in a French accent as thick as Fleur's, "Always a pleasure to have you here. You know that I love to share my passion for vin."

"That I do, and as always I appreciate you sharing your knowledge. My friend, Hermione, is a wine novice, and I thought who better than you to educate her," he said politely.

Demeaux took hold of her hand in both of his and bowed respectfully. "Mademoiselle, it is my humble pleasure to share my knowledge of the vine with you. Come, we will begin."

Hermione's wine education lasted more than an hour. She lost track of the number of wines that she tried, but she realized there truly was a staggering variety. At first she had seemed horrified at the idea of spitting such fine wines out after tasting them, but as time moved on, she realized the value of doing that. If she had been taking even a sip or two of each wine, she was not sure that she would have remembered anything.

When the tasting was over, Demeaux said, "Now that you have received your education, I think it is time for you to move outside where it is warm, and I will send up a very special wine for you. I think that you have earned it."

While she had learned a lot and enjoyed the experience, she was definitely ready to move somewhere warm. "Merci, Monsieur Demeaux. You are truly an expert, and I thank you for teaching me."

"Au revoir, Mademoiselle Hermione, and it was my pleasure," he replied with a small bow.

As Lucius led her back to the warmer climes of the resort, he said, "I hope that you will not find wine so intimidating now."

"No, I don't think I will. Thank you for arranging this. I can't imagine they do that for anyone." She slipped off her jumper now that they were outside.

He chuckled softly. "No, they don't. But I am a very good customer, and they are more than happy to accommodate most special requests I give them."

"I'm sure being wealthy doesn't hurt, either," she said before she really thought about what she said.

Some of the cheerfulness left his face. "It is true that gold is a valuable tool for getting your way, but not everything can be bought. There are times when loyalty brings more reward than money."

She was surprised to hear him voice that opinion. "Really?" she asked, not hiding her surprise.

He smiled at her. "I'm surprising you, aren't I?"

"Very much so." She decided not to say anything more after already having put her foot in her mouth twice.

"I thought you were the advocate for change?" he asked playfully.

She blushed. "I am, but well... I'll just say that our past dealings have not prepared me for how much you have seemed to have changed."

"I am glad that you are able to see the change. It has not been an easy journey for me, but my eyes have been opened to the fact that much of what I learned growing up is not the truth." He gestured at a nearby table and shortly after they sat down, two glasses of wine appeared. He picked up his glass and held it in salute. "To new beginnings."

"To new beginnings," she repeated, still not entirely sure which new beginnings she was toasting.

After taking a sip of the wine, he said, "I do hope that you have also been using your time here to consider your future. Please forgive me for saying so, but you do know that your considerable talents are being wasted at the Ministry, don't you? I would hate to see you drudging your way, unappreciated, undervalued and over worked for years, making the bureaucracy your life-long career. I have to admit, I was quite... surprised. I'd have thought you'd seek employment in the world of business: international markets, company research, there is so much more to do than bonds and notes, currencies and commodities, earnings reports and foreign trade... so much one can achieve."

She put her glass down after having taking a savoring sip and sighed. "I fear that you might be right. I had such high hopes after the war, but change... Well, it's a long and involved process and so many people are resistant to change."

"Hermione, you have to keep in mind that the wizarding world has been very isolated since the seventeenth century. Yes, we are somewhat aware of the goings on of the Muggle world, but we have become very complacent in our ways. Why change something that has been working for hundreds of years?"

She leaned forward in her chair. "But it hasn't been working. Look at how contentious things are with the goblins. That has come from centuries of being treated as lesser beings. I should realize that I can't expect either side to change their ways overnight, but someone has to give first and why not us? Why does it have to be them? They have everything to lose and nothing to gain by making the first move."

"That is true, but again, while it is not perfect, the relationship we have with them functions. From everything I have gathered about goblins, they have no interest in mingling with the wizarding world. They are happy to have no more contact with us than absolutely necessary in carrying out their banking duties, mining, archeological endeavors and treasure acquisitions as well as working in their craft trades. It is a very complex relationship but one that does function. Is there something you think that goblins would want?" he asked pointedly.

She hadn't realized he was so familiar with goblins and their enterprises outside of the wizard banking services. However, his question hit on the very thing she had been trying to determine since she had started trying to normalize relations with the goblins. "I don't know, but I think that equality is a good start. At least take them out of the Magical Creatures Division. Would it hurt to have a Magical Beings Division for the centaurs, goblins, merpeople and house-elves?"

He took another sip of his wine as he contemplated her question. "Probably not, but then again, are any of those beings interested in being part of the wizarding world? Other than the house-elves, none of the others really want to interact with wizards. And it has been that way for ages. That is part of the reason it has never been changed. There has never been any need."

"There might not be a need or an interest, but don't you think their view of wizards might be less harsh if they knew that we considered them something other than creatures? That's such a derogatory word. It implies inferiority, but they aren't inferior, are they? They're just different, and different doesn't mean inferior." She was quite proud of this argument.

He arched an eyebrow at how well her case had been stated. "That is very well said. And I presume you have brought this up through Ministry channels?"

"Several times, but it keeps getting ignored, deemed not important, just like you claimed," she said sharply.

"Indeed I did. However, I do not know that I have heard anyone state the case quite so eloquently. You do not expect that if this change could be made that each of those races would be eager to send a representative to the Ministry, do you?"

Leaning back in her chair as she realized she had convinced him, she said, "No, I don't. But I think that change would make it more likely to gain their cooperation in the future if we should ever need it. The centaurs only helped because of the mutual respect they had shared with Professor Dumbledore." She was interested in hearing his reaction to that given his past power struggles with her old headmaster.

"Indeed. That is what I presumed," he said flatly, clearly not wanting to dredge up memories of the war and his past.

She was a bit disappointed that was all he had to say. A part of her wanted to get into a good argument with him. "So were you wrong about Dumbledore?" she finally asked when the silence became uncomfortable.

He contemplated his wine as he formed his answer. "When he was younger, he was an incredibly talented, very intelligent and outstanding wizard. And mind you, I do realize that Rita Skeeter's biography was not entirely factual, but within her embellishments there was a great deal of truth. He was human and flawed, and his flaws seemed to run deeper than most, perhaps because of how powerful he was. As he grew older, I hold by my belief that he grew out of touch with society. He became isolated in his ivory tower at Hogwarts, allowing things to continue because that is how they had always been. Do you honestly believe that you got the best educational experience you could have?" he asked pointedly.

She considered his words carefully. There were many great professors at Hogwarts, but there had also been several mediocre to poor ones. Hagrid, as big as his heart was, was not the type of person who should have been teaching. And of course there was Professor Binns who lectured more than taught and had no concern as to who his students were or whether they were actually learning anything. Aside from Snape's outward prejudice against Gryffindors, he had been a good teacher. The others Defense Against the Dark Arts aside as that post had been cursed had all provided what she would considered a good education well other than Divination, but they had

learned the reason Dumbledore had kept Trelawney on the staff. Replacing Binns and Hagrid would have definitely been within Dumbledore's means. As would have been regulating Snape's behavior.

"Overall it was a good education," she finally responded. "Yes, some changes could have been made, but nothing is perfect. And what's to say the changes would have resulted in a better education? Besides, you were on the Board of Governors for years, why did the board put up with something like Professor Binns?"

He raised his glass in salute. "Touché! I believe we shall call this round a draw, don't you?" he asked, clearly not wanting to continue the argument.

She laughed softly at his behavior and returned his salute. "I guess I'll have to take that since you won't cede the victory."

"You are a very clever witch, and I can see that one must be prepared to debate a point with you," he replied playfully.

"Thank you," she replied quietly, hoping she had not blushed too much at his praise. That was not the sort of thing she had ever gotten from Ron. Normally when she wanted to debate something, he would roll his eyes and give her the 'not again' body language. She actually enjoyed the process of the debate more than whether she scored a victory or not. You could sometimes learn much more by losing a debate than winning one. She finished her wine and set her glass down on the table.

"Now, my dear, I wondered if you might favor me with your company for dinner again tonight?" he asked hopefully.

"I would be honored," she replied without hesitation.

"Excellent. Now, I shall have to decide where we should eat. There are so many wonderful choices here. Why don't we take a walk along the beach while I ponder that question?" he asked and finished the last of his wine.

"I'd like that," she replied and rose to her feet.

As they walked to the beach, he asked her to mention one of her favorite things. She told him that she enjoyed reading.

"This would be more fun if you divulged things I didn't know about you. I promise to do the same. Such as..." he paused thoughtfully for a moment. "What is your favorite color?"

She thought it was rather odd and fun at the same time as they took turns picking something at random as they strolled shoeless along the surf in the cool sand. The longer they walked, the more esoteric the 'thing' became until they both collapsed into a fit of giggles when she asked him what his favorite worm was.

Once they had recovered from the silliness of favorite things, he said, "I hope that you won't find this presumptuous when I say that spending time with you has made me feel years younger."

She was not sure what to think about that. It was very flattering and also quite flirtatious. "I don't know what to say," she finally replied after a silence that was quickly turning uncomfortable.

"I had come here hoping to merely escape the dreariness of England and drudgery of work instead, I truly feel refreshed and relaxed. It has been a pleasure sharing your company," he said sincerely.

She blushed slightly at his words. "Thank you. I have enjoyed spending time with you as well. I've actually been able to completely forget the Lucius Malfoy I thought I knew."

He bowed his head slightly at her. "I am very pleased to hear that. Now, as to your future..."

Her eyes widened at those words. "My future?" she asked cautiously.

"I was wondering if you have given any consideration to changing your career? You have all the information one could want on Malfoy Industries, and I was wondering if you would consider working for me in some capacity."

She decided there was no point in lying. "I have considered it, but also several other companies as well."

"That is to be expected. But I think you will have noticed that none of those companies have the wide variety of options I do. It would be quite a simple matter for you to find a job that perfectly suited your talents given the number of holdings that I have. Another company might not offer that."

"Are there certain areas where you are hiring?" she asked.

"I am always looking for the best talent in the wizarding world. And right now, you are one of the best who is woefully under-employed. I can offer you the challenges and opportunities that you are not getting at the Ministry. And I assure you the salary I would offer you would be more than competitive."

"I'm not in it for the money," she replied simply.

"That may be true, but why not be adequately compensated for your work? I assure you, the Ministry is not adequately compensating you for the amount and quality of work you are providing," he replied definitively. "You are the classic definition of overworked and underpaid. Not to mention that you could always rejoin the Ministry at some point in the future when you have gained more influence."

She had thought that 'overworked and underpaid' was purely a Muggle saying, but apparently not. And he was right about the fact that she could always return to the Ministry if that was what she wanted down the line. "And if I agree to work for you, when would I start?"

"I leave that decision to you. If you want to take time off before starting, there is nothing wrong with that."

She pondered his words. Everything he was saying were things that had caused her to rank working for his company first on her list of potential new places of employment. "I'll have to think about it. Changing jobs is a very big step. And of course I'll have to discuss this with Ron."

He arched an eyebrow in surprise. "Of course. Though I do hope that you won't let his opinion keep you from doing what is best for you."

"It hasn't yet," she replied quickly and then realized she had probably said too much.

"Oh?" he prompted.

She realized she had to give some sort of answer and actually found it liberating to say, "Let's just say that Ron wants me to be more like his mother even though that's not me. It just seems to be getting worse lately."

"That is a pity. Of course there is nothing wrong with a witch staying at home to raise children, but you have so much potential, and it would be a shame for you to give up on that potential," he replied wisely.

"That's exactly what I keep telling Ron, but he keeps telling me that once the kids are in school I can have the career I always wanted." It felt good to have someone finally agree with her viewpoint.

"Yes, well that is true, but you have to look towards your personal happiness. Not everyone is prepared to be a parent at the same stage in their life. For you, it may be

something that is destined to wait a few more years."

"If only I could convince Ron of that," she said wistfully. "That's what this week was supposed to be about, but he couldn't get time off from work," she said, not bothering to hide the irritation in her voice. She sighed. "I vowed that I would relax, but just thinking about Ron..." She balled her fists in frustration.

Lucius placed a calming hand on her shoulder. "Then we shall not speak of him anymore. I would hate to be responsible for your bad mood."

She relaxed a little. "It's not really a bad mood, it's just stress. And the point of being a vacation is to get away from the stress, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is. And I know the perfect place to dine tonight. We shall dine on The Wharf surrounded by the water." He led her down a path that cut across the island.

She was trying to remember having seen a restaurant on a wharf and could not.

Before they got to the opposite beach, he led her down a tunnel that had the wharf inscribed over the entrance. She had not realized The Wharf had been the name of the restaurant. And she also had no idea what it was referring to since they were underground.

When they were seated, she realized that Lucius had quite literally meant 'surrounded by the water' since The Wharf was a restaurant under the ocean in a bubble with the fish swimming all around them. It was a circular restaurant with each table having a view of the water on both sides, as well as above and below. "You sure know how to pick the right place to cheer a girl up," she replied.

"I thought you might enjoy it here. Narcissa did not much care for it because of the water. While it is perfectly safe, she still did not like the idea of being underwater for so long. I presume you have no such phobias?"

"Oh, no. It's lovely. It's even better than taking the dive because you don't have to get wet and you get to enjoy a nice meal at the same time," she replied as she watched the fish darting around and investigating the patrons.

"That's wonderful to hear," he replied. "Naturally, this is a seafood restaurant, and I'm sure you will be pleased with the cuisine."

"I have no doubt. I have yet to be disappointed by anything here," she replied cheerfully, thoughts of Ron pushed from her mind.

Dinner was wonderful and Hermione both ate and drank too much. After dinner, Lucius walked her back to her bungalow, and she found herself leaning against him for a little support, her arm hooked in his.

When they arrived at her door, she leaned against it and looked up into his eyes. "Thank you for a wonderful evening."

"I should be the one thanking you," he replied softly, gazing deeply into her eyes.

Her heart beat faster at the look of longing he gave her. He started to pull away, but she squeezed his hand, not wanting him to leave.

Slowly he leaned towards her and gently brushed his lips against hers. When she did not try to turn away, he pressed his lips more firmly, intensifying the kiss. Her head soared as her pulse quickened and without thinking, she parted her lips, tasting his lips with her tongue. He responded, his mouth opened slightly and their tongues met. Every nerve in her body seemed to react and she placed her hand on the back of his head as she deepened the kiss.

He eagerly responded, pressing his body against hers, urging her to take the advantage while at the same time submitting to her lead. It was heady indeed, Lucius Malfoy, one of the most influential wizards of the age, powerful, capable, undeniably masculine, suave and yet potentially dangerous, was allowing her, Hermione Granger, swot extraordinaire, to take what she wanted without reservation. There was no struggle for dominance, no hurried rush, no pressure, just the soft caressing of lips, the sensual exploration of mouths and light brush of warm breath on her cheek and the feel of his silken hair in her fingers as his fingers stoked her hair in kind.

Lust consumed Hermione's thoughts. Wanting more from him, she reached back and turned the doorknob, leading him into her room. Once the door was closed behind them, she started unbuttoning his shirt, eager to run her hands on his muscular chest.

He reached behind her and unzipped her dress. Letting it drop slowly to the floor. He then expertly unhooked her bra and gently fondled her breasts, his touch sending shivers of anticipation through her body.

Neither of them said anything, but at this point words were not needed.

She slipped her hand past his waistband to rub his throbbing erection, eliciting a moan of pleasure from him. He reached down and unfastened his trousers, letting them fall to his feet. She was slightly surprised that he had not been wearing any underpants. As he stepped out of his trousers, he slowly pushed her backwards, towards the bedroom.

When the back of her legs hit the edge of the bed, she allowed him to lower her to its surface. He pinned her arms next to her head and gave her a deep, passionate kiss. She could not remember the last time she had felt so alive, so desired.

He looked into her eyes, the longing clear, and she felt she could spend a lifetime lost in their depths. Gently he shifted her so that she was fully on the bed and began caressing and teasing her body. His soft touch elicited moans of desire and the throbbing between her legs was becoming unbearable.

She took his hand and placed it between her legs, showing him how much she desired him. He grinned playfully as he used his fingers to stimulate her. She rolled her hips, helping him find that magic spot.

She became lost in her physical desires until she felt herself rushing towards orgasm. She wanted to feel him inside her, wanted them to come together. Reluctantly she pushed his hand away, softly asking, "Please?"

He took his moist fingers and seductively licked them, fueling her desire even more. "As you wish," he said, positioning himself over her, and he slowly entered her moistness.

She moaned as he filled her. This was exactly what she wanted. She wrapped her legs behind his, pulling him deeper. While a part of her did not want this feeling to end, the rest of her knew that she could not hold back much longer. Urging him to thrust faster, she raised her hips, wanting to feel him deeper inside her. She exploded around him, rippling waves that crashed and rolled, repeating and repeating under and around him.

Chapter 8

Ron finally gets some time off and joins Hermione in the Bahamas. Can he make the most of this romantic getaway?

Chapter 8

Hermione woke up tangled in her blanket, sweaty, and completely disoriented. She looked around her room, but could see little. "Lights!" she shouted and the lights came on. Looking around again, she saw that she was alone.

"A dream. It was all a dream," she said, relieved, but also a bit disturbed that she had just dreamt about spending a romantic night with Lucius. She should have been having erotic dreams about Ron if she was going to have them.

Her head was throbbing from all the wine she had drunk with dinner, and she stumbled out of bed to the bath to find something for the hangover. How much had she had to drink anyway? As she dug through her bag for the potion, she began to wonder if she had made a fool of herself the previous evening.

As the potion took effect and her mind started to clear, she was reasonably certain she had not done anything foolish.

He had been the perfect gentleman and had walked her back to her room. Her imagination had run away from her while she slept. She blamed Ginny and that blasted romance novel for her dream.

Checking the clock, she saw that it was still the middle of the night. Unfortunately, she was now wide awake. Her thoughts drifted to Lucius and how different he was from Ron. He seemed genuinely interested in her and her intellect, something she could not always say about Ron. And he treated her so politely, like she was the center of the universe. It was extremely flattering.

When she realized she was fantasizing about Lucius, she tried to give herself a dose of reality. "Come on, Hermione, he's old enough to be your father. Draco was your classmate." But that did not really seem to have much effect on her emotional side. That side told her that Lucius filled a void that Ron had never come close to filling. And she knew that side of her was right.

She loved Ron, valued his friendship, but she was not sure that they really belonged together as a couple anymore. As much as she loved the Weasleys, she really did not fit in with them. But would she fit in better with Malfoy? He traveled in pureblood circles and some of the worst Death Eaters had been his relations. Yes, he seemed to be reformed, but she also knew that many in the pureblood circles still did not accept her kind. Was he merely toying with her?

As much as she wanted to know the answer to that question, she knew that she would never ask it. That was not the sort of question a person answered truthfully. Besides, this whole exercise was utterly pointless because she was married. Ron would be here in one more day, and she hoped that together they could use the time to work on their relationship. It had been good once.

Since there were plenty of activities, she hoped to be able to minimize her time around Lucius. Unfortunately, since they shared many of the same interests, he tended to be where she was. It seemed odd, but considering he arrived first just as often as she was, it was just strange chance. Thinking back, ever since she ran into Lucius in the library, her life was full of strange coincidences where he was concerned.

On Wednesday and Thursday she found that he was at about half the activities that she had chosen. When he wasn't there, it almost felt like something was missing. Despite her intention to dine alone, she found herself sharing dinner with him both nights. Everything had been very platonic, but she could not get out of her mind the feeling that he admired her for something more than her intellect. From the look he had given her as they said goodnight last night, she could have sworn that it looked like he wanted to give her a kiss. At that moment, she would not have refused him if he'd tried.

Of course, she was sure that she was reading too much into that look. That romance novel had clearly had an effect on her imagination. They had just been two lonely people who had found companionship at a resort bustling with couples nothing more.

By the time Friday arrived, Hermione was completely conflicted. She had decided that she did want to work for one of Lucius' companies, but a part of her wondered if that would be a good idea given how friendly the two of them had become. But then again, it was friendly. There was nothing romantic about their relationship that had only been her imagination. Not to mention the fact that she would merely be one of thousands of people working for Malfoy Industries it wasn't like she was going to be his personal assistant.

She was enjoying breakfast in the garden café when he joined her at her table. "So, Mr. Weasley is joining you today?" he asked by way of confirming something he already knew.

"Unless something changes in his schedule, yes," she replied, but she did not sound at all excited, which bothered her.

"I do hope that two of you enjoy your weekend. I'll be returning to Britain shortly. If I leave for too long, I find they try to make far too many changes in my absence," he laughed softly, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Oh," she said, not entirely able to keep the disappointment out of her voice, even though she knew it was for the best that he not be here while Ron was. "Well, I would like to thank you for showing me the secrets of the resort and for keeping me company. I imagine this week would have been quite boring without you here."

"You are quite welcome," he replied warmly. "Though I doubt you would have found this place boring. There are far too many activities for someone to be bored, unless that is what they desire."

"That is very true, but you made my stay more pleasant by recommending the best activities and providing much needed company." Her cheeks flushed slightly at the warm smile he was giving her.

He reached across the table and squeezed her hand. He did not immediately release her, but let his hand linger on hers. "Then your happiness has made me happy." He watched her for a few moments before finally removing his hand from hers. "When you return, please send me an owl with your decision. You would make a very valuable employee, and I would hate to lose you to a competitor."

"Oh, I think I've already decided. No other company can offer me what yours does," she reassured him. She had meant to talk to Ron, but she knew what his opinion would be and that would not be enough to compel her to change her mind. No other company could offer her the opportunities she would get working at Malfoy Industries.

"That is wonderful news indeed. I think that an interview will be in order on Monday. Just a formality, but it would look suspicious if I hired you without your interviewing," he said knowingly.

"I think that is a very valid point. I doubt anyone would look on Merlin's Cove as the appropriate place to conduct a job interview," she agreed.

"Will two in the afternoon be acceptable for you? I'll make the arrangements."

"I think that would work perfectly." It would give her time to catch up on anything waiting for her on her desk, and she was sure she could slip away. "Thank you again, Lucius, and have safe journey home," she replied as he rose to his feet.

"Thank you, and enjoy the rest of your vacation." He gave her a small bow before retreating.

He had just left the café and already the resort felt emptier. She knew that she would not randomly run across him in her wandering of the resort. But Ron was coming, and she had already picked out a few activities for the two of them – ones that she thought they would both enjoy. One of the reasons she was taking a vacation was to improve her relationship with Ron, and that was what she needed to concentrate on.

When Ron was due to arrive, she decided to wait on the veranda of her bungalow, knowing that he would be directed here upon his arrival. Time passed and he did not arrive. She presumed that he had to have been delayed at work, and she started to wonder for how long.

She finished her book and checked the clock. It was nearly three in the afternoon, which meant that it was eight in the evening back in London, long after Ron should have gotten off work. Rather than stay in the Bungalow, she decided to go walk the beach. The way the house-elves kept track of everyone here, one of them should be able to direct Ron to her.

The later it got, the more irate she became. If he knew he was going to be late, he could have sent her a Floo message. In fact, she realized that she had not received a single message from him since she had been gone. She knew that Ron was not normally one to write, but she had found time to send him four messages. He could have found the time to write a quick note if nothing else.

Finally at a little after six o'clock, he showed up. She decided not to hide her frustration from him. "Where have you been?" she asked, hands firmly planted on her hips and sounding a bit too much like Molly for her liking.

"It got busy at work, I'm sorry," he replied sheepishly.

"Too busy to send a quick message?" she asked as she closed on him.

"Well..." he replied and ruffled his hair.

She could not believe what she smelled as she got close to him. "Ron, have you been... drinking?"

He flushed bright red and looked away from her. "You went to a guys' night out rather than coming to join your wife on vacation?" She was outraged.

"Look, it wasn't like that..." he said defensively before she cut him off.

"Wasn't like that? How can you even say that? How could it not be like that? Did your boss tie you down and force ale down your throat?" She was gathering a head of steam.

Ron seemed to realize how much trouble he was in and tried to deflect her ire. "You know that wouldn't happen. Billingsley just got engaged, and we went out to celebrate. So I had a pint or two."

She could not believe how nonchalant he was about the whole ordeal. It just boggled her mind. She did not know where to start. "I'd wager a bit more than that. And Billingsley wouldn't have understood that you had a prior engagement?"

"Like you've never been late for something that was planned in advance," he shot back, using her past behavior against her.

She knew he was right and that's what made his statement sting the most. She was about to open her mouth to try to defend herself, but he cut her off.

"And I seem to recall you not letting anyone know that you were going to be late either," he replied defensively.

She realized she did not have much of a leg to stand on and decided to let it drop. "Okay, so we have both done stupid things in our relationship. Since we have a limited time here, how about we try to enjoy it?"

"That sounds good to me, and I think the first thing I need to do is change into something more suitable. I'm boiling!"

As Ron changed, Hermione tried to find out what he might be in the mood to eat, but it seemed that he had eaten before leaving London, and he was not showing much interest in any of the restaurants she mentioned. She finally just chose one since she was hungry.

During dinner Ron was indifferent. He had clearly had more than a pint or two and was not only not interested in conversation, but seemed on the verge of falling asleep as he pushed his food aimlessly around his plate.

Hermione tried not to let her frustration show. She had just grown used to eating with Lucius, who always found a way to make her seem important and participated in the conversation. Realizing she was thinking of him that way made her even more upset. He was going to be her boss in a roundabout way as she was sure that she would not be working directly for him – and she should not think of her boss like that. Not to mention that it was her husband who should be treating her like the most important person in the world.

The experiences she had shared with Lucius this last week were merely because they were two lonely people who happened to know each other and have things in common. After all, he never made any romantic gestures towards her – his behavior had been calculated to recruit her to work for him – hadn't it?

Now she was becoming confused. The warm smiles, gentle touches, they hadn't meant anything, had they?

Ron disturbed her from her reverie. "Hey, Hermione, if you're done eating, I'd like to get some sleep."

She was not done, but Ron was not being much of a dinner companion. "I'm not, but why don't you go back to the room?"

He did not even protest that it would be rude for him to leave her alone to finish dinner. He rose, said, "Good night, Hermione," and then did nothing to stifle a large yawn before leaving the restaurant without even kissing her goodnight.

She could not even muster up the politeness to wish him good night in return. Instead, she ordered another glass of wine and vowed to enjoy the rest of her dinner.

When she returned to the room, she found a fully clothed Ron passed out on the sofa. He had not even taken his shoes off.

She was fuming. This was supposed to be a romantic getaway weekend, and he had ruined the start of it. She was not sure if it was going to get better, but if it was, she was going to have to calm down and give him a chance to redeem himself. Deciding the best way to relax was to take a nice hot bath, she grabbed her book and headed to the bathroom. Yes, she had already finished it, but the fiction of that book was better than the reality lying on the sofa.

The bath with its magically scented bubbles soothed away her anxieties and let her lose herself in her book. Only she now imagined herself as the heroine, Ron the overbearing and boorish boyfriend and Lucius as the savior.

When she found herself starting to doze, she dried off and headed to bed. Of course, the visions inspired by the bath returned in her dreams and she slept better than she had in days.

Hermione woke feeling refreshed. Her dreams had been liberating. She thought she finally knew what she wanted to do. And a lot of it would depend on how Ron reacted to her announcement of a career change.

She could hear movement in the front room and realized that Ron was up. Rising from bed, she went to see what he was doing. Unsurprisingly, she found him quite literally stuffing himself with breakfast and she sighed.

"Morning, 'Mione," he said around a bite of food.

Taking the seat across from him, she asked, "Room service?"

He washed down his oversized bite of food with some pumpkin juice. "Sorry. I wasn't sure when you were going to be up and didn't want to wake you."

She took a deep breath. He had missed so many opportunities. He could have woken her sweetly to at least have breakfast on their veranda if not one of the cafes. He could have brought her breakfast in bed. Instead, he had only thought of his stomach. He was so inconsistent that he continued to confound her.

She then realized that he had only ordered enough for one. Rather than deal with frustration he was causing, she said, "I'm going to go get dressed. Why don't you get cleaned up and we'll go out to finish breakfast."

He gave the food on the table a look as though she was asking him to commit a crime. She gave him a final glare, and he rose from his seat and headed for the bathroom. She could hear the water running in the shower as she dressed. Once she had her clothes on, she looked at her hair in her mirror and teased it into something somewhat respectable, knowing that Ron would get irritated if she delayed breakfast to fix her hair.

It was not long until Ron emerged from the bathroom, dressed and looking less rough than he had last night. "Ready?" he asked.

She sighed. "Ready." She had hoped for a little complement, a little something of acknowledgment. Of course, that was not his habit, so she did not know why she should suddenly expect it. Lucius' attentive behavior had definitely spoiled her.

Since she was familiar with the resort, she led him to one of the little cafes that had a beautiful view of the ocean. She was taking a few moments to savor the morning sun reflecting off the ocean and the birds playing in the surf. She looked over to Ron to see if he was also enjoying the view and noticed him staring longingly at the buffet. "Why don't we sit over here?" she said as she pointed at a nearby table that was about as far from the buffet as you could get.

Once they were seated, she placed her order for a pot of tea to the table, and it arrived almost immediately. Knowing that Ron was interested in the food, she rose back to her feet and led him to the buffet.

She put a modest amount of food on her plate and noticed that Ron's was heaping. She tried not to sound too judgmental as she said, "You know that can make more than one trip, don't you?"

He shrugged. "I probably will. The food here looks great. You really know how to pick a place," he said excitedly.

She forced herself to bite her tongue. She knew that Ron was passionate about food, but she had hoped the sheer beauty of their surroundings might elicit some sort of response from him. Not that his current behavior surprised her, but she had held out hope since he did occasionally have moments where he said and did the right thing. Clearly she was not going to be treated to one of those moments.

After they settled at the table and had had a few minutes to eat in silence, she realized that Ron had no intention of initiating any conversation. Instead she decided to take control and said, "I picked out a few activities I thought you might enjoy. When we return to the room you can look them over."

His fork stopped partway to his mouth. "Come on, Hermione, we're on vacation do you have to plan everything out," he protested.

She leaned forward and lowered her voice to a harsh whisper. "Yes, we are on vacation to a resort with a lot to offer. And no, I did not plan everything out. I've spent the week here trying to find a way to make our weekend special. And what do you do? You show up late and drunk at that. How do you think that made me feel?"

No longer feeling like eating, she rose from the table and left. Ron called her name, but she ignored him. It would take more than that to get her attention. She did not want to return to the bungalow and instead just started following whichever path struck her fancy. She listened for Ron's footsteps behind her, but did not hear them. That only made her angrier. Clearly he had decided that breakfast was more important than finding out what was bothering her.

As she walked through the winding paths and encountered the animals that lived at the resort, she started to wonder why she tried. She continually put a lot of effort into their relationship, and Ron tended to put in as little as possible. She started to wonder if when he did put effort in if it was because of his own volition or because Harry or Ginny prompted him to do so.

She finally stopped in one of the secret rose gardens and decided to sit on a bench by a fountain. Since it was a magical fountain, the sculptures danced and swam in the water in a soothing pattern. It was a long pattern, but she sat there long enough that she was able to decipher the pattern.

Hearing footsteps approaching, she glanced up from the fountain and saw Ron standing sheepishly by the entrance. "Hermione..." he started contritely.

"Took you long enough. Didn't want your eggs to get cold?" she snapped.

"Look, I didn't know where to find you," he said defensively, clearly avoiding the subject of him not immediately following her.

She glared at him. "You could have gotten up from the table and followed me. It's not like I Disapparated somewhere. Or you could have asked one of the house-elves." She could not understand his behavior. If he had truly cared about her, he should have done something to show it by now.

"Are you advocating using house-elves now?" he sniped.

"Don't change the subject," she snapped. "The point is that it took you close to an hour to find me. It shouldn't have taken you that long."

"This is a big resort and this garden isn't exactly easy to find. I did find you though." After a long and uncomfortable pause, he said, "I'm sorry, Hermione."

While she appreciated his apology, there was a lot he needed to apologize for, and she wanted to hear some more contrition. She returned her attention to the fountain.

"I'm sorry about how I arrived last night. I wasn't thinking. I had thought this vacation was about you getting away and relaxing. I knew you needed it since you've been really stressed out."

She turned to face him and replied quietly, "That was part of it. But it's also about us. When you are a couple, decisions by one person affect the other that's just the way it is. If it was just about me, why would I have asked you about trying to get time off from work?"

"Good point. But I think we both know I can be a bit thick sometimes," he replied jovially.

She didn't think his behavior was the least bit humorous. "A bit? Ron, I shouldn't have to spell everything out. There are times I think you get what it means to be a couple, but then you go and do something like this well, I think it speaks for itself," she replied curtly.

He picked up her hand. "I'm trying, Hermione. I really am."

"Are you really?" she asked as her eyes pierced into his. "I would think that something like going out and getting drunk when you were expected somewhere by your wife would be common sense. And what about Harry? Didn't he comment on you being at the guys' night out?" she asked pointedly.

He ruffled his hair and looked away from her. "Actually, he wasn't there. He went home to Ginny," Ron replied sheepishly.

"And that didn't clue you in that you should do the same, Ron!" She could feel her blood starting to boil again and she started counting.

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely. "Look, it happened. It was stupid of me, but we can't go back and change the past."

She sighed. That was one of the most profound statements he had made in a long time. "No, we can't, but we can change things going forward," she replied in a resigned voice. After a long pause, she said, "I've been thinking about my job at the Ministry." She watched him perk up.

"Are you thinking about quitting it?" he asked hopefully.

"I am, but..."

He wrapped her in a tight embrace. "Oh, Hermione, that's wonderful news," he said.

She gently pushed him back. "Ron, that doesn't mean that I'm going to stop working. The last couple of weeks I've been looking for a new job, and I think I've found one that will be perfect for me. My talents will be better appreciated, and there will be more challenge."

"Which means longer hours, right?" he asked, utterly deflated of his earlier elation.

"Not necessarily. Because I'll be in a position better suited to my skills, I won't have to try so hard to get noticed. The Ministry is a bureaucracy, and as such a lot of it is based on seniority and not necessarily competency. The private sector is based more on competency."

"Will the pay be better?" he asked.

She had been prepared for him to ask that. "Yes."

"How much better?" he asked eagerly.

Hermione couldn't believe that Ron only seemed interested in the money. She was talking about finally having a job where her talents would be appreciated and she might be able to do some good and instead he focused solely on the paycheck. "I'm not sure yet," she replied shortly. "I haven't exactly interviewed for the job. I was going to do that when we got back home. But I have been assured that I will be paid more than at the Ministry."

"Well, there is that. But you know that you don't have to work," he suggested.

"Yes, I do know that. But I told you that it's something I want to do. I know I can contribute to making the wizarding world better, and that's what I want to do for right now."

He smiled forlornly at her. "I know. I was just hoping you might have changed your mind."

She placed her hand on his knee. "In time, Ron. I just want to do this on my schedule."

To change the subject, he asked, "So where are you thinking of working?"

"I was looking at Malfoy Industries..."

He jumped to his feet and shouted, "Malfoy! How can you possibly be considering working for him!"

Having anticipated this reaction, she said, "Because his companies are some of the most influential and numerous in Britain. There my talents can be used to their fullest, and I will have the most opportunity to make a difference. Besides, don't you think I would have done some research about where I wanted to work? I have looked into Malfoy's record since the war, and at least outwardly, he has changed his beliefs. He has quite a few Muggle-borns in senior positions, including Justin Finch-Fletchley."

"And that's enough for you to want to work for him? He has personally insulted you. Draco has personally insulted you," Ron reminded her.

She sighed. "I am aware of both of those facts, but I have spoken with Malfoy..."

"You spoke with Malfoy? When?" he demanded.

Knowing how it might look to mention the fact that she had spent most of the week with Lucius, she opted for only telling Ron what he needed to know. "I ran into him at the library when I was researching companies, and we had the opportunity to talk about his businesses. That's how I got offered the job interview."

He still did not seem convinced. "I just don't know. Before you commit, can you let Harry and me look into this?"

She was irritated by his lack of trust. "Ron, I'm an adult. I am perfectly capable of making my own decisions, and I think I am a better judge of character than you. I will not wait for you and Harry to approve my decision. It is my decision to make, and I have made it. I'm going to interview on Monday, and I'll probably start in a couple of weeks if I get the job."

"And if you don't get the job?" he prompted.

She knew that interview on Monday was formality, but that would involve her going more in depth about her relationship with Lucius. "I prefer to think positively, but there are a couple of other companies I've been considering."

"Then why not take a job with one of them, instead? That way you wouldn't have to work for Malfoy."

"I already told you: his companies provide the best opportunities for me. You are just going to have to trust me that I know what I'm doing." She crossed her arms defensively, letting him know that she had made up her mind.

"I guess I have to," he replied reluctantly, knowing that she would not be swayed. "You have always been the voice of reason, so I really don't have a reason not to trust you, do I?"

"No, you don't," she stated, somewhat pleased by his response, though not entirely trusting the sincerity of his words.

"Though it's not you I don't trust, it's him. It's just that he's lied and deceived his way for so many years that it's hard for me to believe that he really has changed," Ron replied simply.

"At the first sign of questionable behavior, I'll quit," she said, hoping that would placate Ron, but a part of her believed that he would still recruit Harry to dig into Lucius' past since the war, just to make sure he wasn't deceiving Hermione.

A/N: Again, many thanks to my wonderful beta beawesley2 who has provided invaluable help.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 29

Lucius returns from vacation and reflects on how his life has suddenly changed

Chapter 9

Lucius returned to England feeling much more relaxed than he had before leaving. Granted he had not indulged in the fling Connor had suggested, but he had found his encounter with Hermione quite invigorating despite the lack of physical intimacy.

They had flirted with each other all week, and he could tell from her responses that he still had it. She had smiled and blushed at his attention, and he had enjoyed watching her thrive. That morning she had looked far more relaxed and healthier than she had upon her arrival on the island. He had to believe that he had at least played a small role in that. And he knew that he most definitely felt happier than he had when he had left England.

Aside from a few tense moments, they had thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. And now that she was going to work for him, he could find ways to run into her more often. He smiled deviously at this thought.

A part of him wanted to feel guilty about his feelings towards her, but she had clearly shown that she was unhappy with her marriage. He would not do anything to actively drive her away from Weasley, but he would show her how much better it could be with someone else, preferably him.

He still wasn't sure when during the last week his feelings for her had changed. He had not lied when he had told her that spending time with her had made him feel years younger. After their first day together, he had made sure to 'casually' run into her so that they could spend more time together. As the week had progressed, he had found it more and more difficult to maintain their platonic relationship. That final night when he had escorted her back to her bungalow, he had wanted nothing more than to give her a deep passionate kiss and take her to her bedroom. Amazingly he had resisted and returned to his bungalow.

He briefly considered taking a short trip over the weekend to indulge in the fling Connor had suggested, but now that he had decided Hermione was to be the witch for him, he felt that would be indecent. No, he had waited three years, he could wait a little while longer.

Deciding he should stop by the office to see what was waiting on his desk and if anything was urgent, he changed into his usual robes. After all, the light linen he had worn on the island would not be appropriate here.

His secretary had prioritized the correspondence so that it only took him three hours to give everything a first pass. He looked at the stack of paperwork that required more attention. He knew that if he started working on it now, he would be working late into the night. Since there was nothing waiting for him at his manor and he was still on Bahamian time, he elected to do something productive.

The letter on the top of the stack was from Elsa Schwarz of Schwarz Kesselwerks, a German cauldron company he was looking to acquire to diversify his business interests. He knew her company was having some cash flow problems, and he could not only solve that problem, but by merging with Malfoy Industries, Schwarz would more easily be able to sell cauldrons in Britain. She was open to a meeting, but requested it be at her headquarters near Frankfurt. Normally he would have preferred doing business in London, but this would give him a chance to look over their operations to make sure it was a sound investment.

He penned a brief reply agreeing to the meeting and suggested Tuesday. He then consulted his notes about the company, the Schwarz family and German wizarding customs. One of the lessons from his father had been that you could never have too much information.

The company had been in business for over three hundred years, but over the last five years there had been some questionable business decisions which had left it in a precarious position. Glancing back at the biography he had on Elsa, he saw that she had been president of the company for about the same amount of time. She was well educated, had spent some time in America working for an uncle after school, but seemingly lacked business sense, which struck him as odd given her history of working for the family business for almost fifteen years. Her age caught his eye she was 38 and apparently unmarried. But since his research department had neglected to include a photograph, he would have to double check that information.

He leaned back in his chair as he pondered this bit of information. This could definitely work to his advantage. He could use his charms to perhaps ensure a more favorable merger.

After spending a few hours going over all the information he had on the Schwarz Kesselwerks, he decided to retire for the night since it was nearly midnight.

Lucius returned home to his empty manor. If Weasley had not been coming to meet Hermione, he would have stayed the weekend at the resort. Of course, it was probably for the best that he was not there. She was permeating his thoughts, his dreams, and he knew that spending too much time around her could be dangerous. After all, he was a man and men had certain urges. It felt good to have those urges again, but the timing was not the best.

As he walked through the empty hallways, he contemplated the future. As long as she was with Weasley, there was no future.

He had no doubt that he could have initiated an affair with her, but what then? Would she have been able to keep her infidelity from Weasley? And even if she did, that was no future. She would still be Weasley's in part. No, he wanted something emotionally and physically satisfying. He wanted her to be his wife, his partner. He wanted to sit by the fire in the evening and have a lively debate with her.

He had shown her how he would treat her, what she was apparently missing in her marriage, but would it be enough?

Her reluctance to discuss Weasley or their relationship made it difficult for him to judge how tenuous it was. If only he knew the source of their tension, he might be able to find a way to exploit it, to drive her to the logical conclusion that she was better off without Weasley.

Of course, she would also have to convince Weasley he was better off without her, which could be more difficult. While he did not necessarily hold the Weasleys in the highest regard, they were still an old wizarding family and would surely feel the stigma of divorce. This would not be nearly as contentious an issue if she had instead married someone with Muggle ties.

He tried not to think about what she was doing now. Weasley would be there, and she would be sharing the secrets of the resort with him, the same secrets he had imparted to her. And no doubt they would dine at one of the restaurants he had recommended. He might have unwittingly given her the information that she needed to preserve her marriage.

That thought made him shudder. But there had been no choice. He wanted her to enjoy their time together, and that had involved making her stay as pleasant as possible.

But even if Weasley was reaping the benefits of Lucius' knowledge of the resort, he had a hard time believing the young man was treating Hermione with the level of

attention he had shown her. Her reaction to his praise and attentiveness had shown him that it was not something she normally received. That was what would work in his favor.

In fact, it was entirely possible that Weasley was being his boorish self and only reinforcing to Hermione that she could do so much better.

He chose to believe that latter.

Lucius cracked his eyes and tried to determine what time it was. The light peering through the crack in the drapes seemed stronger than it should have been, but he had been up late last night and was still operating on an internal clock that was set to five time zones away. While he would have liked to have drifted back to sleep, he knew that it was best to just get up and work through straight through. Checking the clock, he saw that it was nearly nine in the morning. He forced himself to get up and prepare for the day, though he had no idea what he would be doing.

He presumed there would be some personal correspondence, but that was unlikely to take more than an hour. He did want to go to the library and see if there was any information there about Elsa Schwarz especially a photograph. After that... He was forced into the realization that his life had become incredibly dull. He sighed and decided to just get on with his day. Soon enough the merger would consume much of his time.

It was nearly ten o'clock before he finished dressing, consumed a light breakfast and retired to his office. As he had expected, the personal correspondence only took about an hour. He then returned his attention to the information he had on the Schwarz Kesselwerks. He was adding to his notes when one of the house-elves popped into the office.

"Excuse me, Master. Mr. Connor is here to see you, sir," the elf said apologetically.

"Send him in," Lucius replied as he glanced at the clock and saw that it was shortly after noon. He was looking forward to Connor's visit, though he knew that there were things he could not tell his friend, it would be good to have someone to converse with.

Connor had a huge grin on his face. "You look good. How was the Bahamas?" he asked as he strode over to the bar.

Lucius set down his quill. "It was precisely what I needed."

"Oh?" Connor asked inquisitively. "Would you like something?" he asked as he helped himself.

Lucius had to laugh at the fact their friendship had progressed to the point where Connor felt nothing amiss about helping himself to his liquor. "Scotch, neat, but I think you knew that."

"I was just being polite," Connor quipped as he poured the drinks. He turned around and handed the glass to Lucius who had come around from behind the desk. They sat on either end of the sofa. "So, a vacation was precisely what you needed?" Connor asked with a sly grin on his face.

"It was quite relaxing. And before you ask, I did not have a fling," Lucius pre-empted.

"Ah, Lucius, you missed a golden opportunity. Unless...?," Connor examined his friend's expression trying to read it, "you found someone while you were there."

Lucius tried to keep a passive expression, but he was sure that he was failing. Connor simply knew him too well.

"So, who is she?" Connor prodded.

Lucius sipped his drink before replying. "I'd rather not say right now. I think it best for both of us if I keep that to myself for the time being. After all, we have not formally started dating, and I'd rather not let the harpies know that I'm playing the field, so to speak."

"Well, I can understand that, but I don't know how well you'll be able to keep that secret. Your entire demeanor has changed," Connor observed.

Lucius was not surprised to hear this since he felt different. "Well, we'll just have to see. We hope to do this on our terms rather than someone else's." He was surprised by his use of the plural since Hermione did not know she was being courted. His gaze took on a faraway look as he imagined a future where he and Hermione were together.

Connor leaned forward in anticipation. "So is there anything you can tell me about her?"

After a few seconds of consideration where Lucius tried to determine what he could tell his friend, he said, "She's bright, ambitious and a joy to be around. I can tell that we can have many wonderful years of stimulating conversation." He took another sip of his drink and contemplated whether he should mention her age and decided that would be too specific.

"That's it?" Connor asked, disappointed that he wasn't getting more details.

"That's it. Anymore and I would be compromising her identity. I'm sure you understand," he replied obliquely. He knew that Hermione was well known enough that it would be possible for Connor to at least suspect her.

"Well then, here's to your blossoming relationship," Connor said and raised his glass.

Lucius did the same. He hoped it would blossom, but there were no guarantees. Everything depended on her. "Did you want to stay for lunch?"

"That would be marvelous. It's cleaning day, and I had to find some peace. Rather than pop in on Astoria, I thought I'd see how your vacation went. Perhaps you can share some more details over lunch?"

Lucius pondered this for a moment. He could see no harm in letting Connor know how he spent his time at the resort. He would just have to be careful not to use Hermione's name and accidentally give away her identity.

They spent the next hour over a light lunch talking about the resort. Connor kept pressing for details and was genuinely disappointed that Lucius had been so tight lipped on the matter of her identity, even any vague word that could allow him to suss it out. "Let me get this straight, as smitten as you are with this witch, you had not even given her so much as a goodnight kiss?" Connor asked incredulously.

"I want to take this slow, make sure she knows how special she is. I guess I'm just a bit old fashioned," Lucius replied. He wasn't really old fashioned, but it sounded good and would deflect attention from the fact that he had done nothing because he wasn't technically courting her since she was most decidedly unavailable. He knew that there was nothing he could say that would cause Connor to approve of him chasing after a married witch.

"Well, I should get home and leave you to go write a letter to your lady love. Glad to hear that you are finally courting someone, even if you won't tell me who it is... yet." Connor gave him a sly wink before departing.

Lucius grinned. He would like nothing more than to write Hermione a letter, but that just was not possible. He had no guarantees that something like that would not fall into the wrong hands.

After surviving a dull weekend alone, he decided to see his hiring manager first thing Monday to present him information about Hermione. Of course Hiram Grey would

realize that the interview was a mere formality for someone recommended by Lucius. Over the course of their time together in the Bahamas, Lucius had used the time to determine where Hermione's interests and passions had laid, and determined she had a fondness for potions and kept up on the latest developments in various periodicals. He mentioned to Hiram that she might be well suited to the Potions Research division.

After that, it was back to the paperwork waiting for his perusal. The mundane paperwork was the worst part. He liked having input into new product development, arranging business deals, but the paperwork had never interested him. Unfortunately it was a necessary fact of life, and he always devoted the necessary time to taking care of administrative matters. He thought that was part of why his business was so successful. He knew that he could have easily delegated a lot of the work to others, but then he would not be as aware of the state of his holdings. He had seen companies fail for that reason which of course had been to his financial advantage when he could swoop in and turn the company around in short order. While his father had not been the most loving or supportive father, Abraxas had been an amazing businessman, and Lucius had been an excellent student.

He made the final preparations for his meeting in Frankfurt tomorrow. He was vexed that there had been no pictures and no personal information to be found on Elsa. Clearly she was a very private person. He had hoped to learn something, some small tidbit that he could use to charm her. While he did not need this information to succeed, it would have made it easier and helped ensure that he did nothing to unwittingly embarrass himself. He would just need to proceed cautiously.

After a long workday, Lucius arrived at the manor and wondered how much longer he would be the only one living there. It had been far too long since he had shared his home with anyone. He vowed that he would not wallow in pity any longer, but instead decided to plan how best to proceed with regards to Hermione. At this point he was not even willing to admit it to her. He knew that her relationship was in flux, and he was unsure what his declaration of affection would do. Most likely it would drive her away.

Lucius knew that over the next few weeks, he was likely to have little opportunity to see Hermione. There would be new employee orientation, but at most that would only be a few minutes. Of course it was probably best that he avoid her for a while. The temptation to woo her away from Weasley was too great. He knew that he could not interfere lest he invite scandal. Her decision to leave Weasley would have to appear to be devoid of outside influence. He had shown her what life with him would be like. Hopefully, after a few weeks of her living the status quo with Weasley, she would come to the realization that she could do better.

It would also allow him time to concentrate on the acquisition of the Schwartz Kesselwerks. He knew that he was likely to be spending the next few days in Frankfurt and that would divert his attention from Hermione for the time being.

After she had had time to settle in to her new job and with her coworkers, he would seek her out. But he wanted her to feel comfortable in her surroundings since he had no doubt that she would feel uncomfortable about their friendship. That was the one disadvantage of her working for him. He would do everything he could to put her at ease so that no one would care about their friendship.

He would take his cues from her about how often he should 'run in' to her. It would be easy to run into her after work, but he also knew how suspicious it would look if that happened too often. If he had been married, there might not have been much question about the two of them spending time together. But he was not married, and for him to be seen with a married witch in the evening social period would surely lead to gossip of the unwelcome variety.

Lucius arrived in Frankfurt as prepared as he could be. He wished he had been able to divine more personal information about the Schwarz family than he had, but he felt that he had enough to understand that Elsa had been taking quite a few risks since taking over the company, trying to improve their profit margin, but most of her gambles had not been very lucrative. Depending what he saw during the plant tour, he felt this could be an excellent acquisition.

He was met at the Apparition point, though not by Elsa.

"Guten Morgen, Herr Malfoy. I am Max Weiss and I will be your escort."

Lucius inclined his head. "A pleasure to meet you, Herr Weiss," he said somewhat formally, but with a warm smile. For now it was best to be polite, especially when titles were not used. He did not recall Weiss being mentioned in the dossier, something he would have to bring up with his research staff.

There was no conversation as he was led into the building. This suited Lucius as he was free to observe his surroundings. Everything appeared neat and well cared for good signs that the business had not been completely run into the ground. He was escorted to a conference room and offered refreshments. He took some tea and sat at the table to wait. He was not finding this a favorable first impression.

After about five minutes, Elsa and a small entourage arrived. "Mr. Malfoy, my apologies for keeping you waiting," Elsa said in English that held only the slightest hint of a German accent as she reached to shake his hand. "Something requiring my urgent attention occurred shortly before your arrival." She noticed that he was alone. "You do not have an assistant?" she asked curiously.

He had risen to his feet upon her arrival and returned her handshake. "It's good to meet you, Frau Schwartz. I always prefer to meet potential new business partners on a more personal level before getting down to business. I find it a much more relaxed environment." He gave her his best smile. While she was not one of the most beautiful women he had ever met, she was rather attractive. She was slightly shorter than him with shoulder length brown hair. He did not notice a wedding band, but he knew that it was not custom in Germany to wear one, though some did.

She took a seat and asked cautiously. "Is that so?"

Sitting across from her, he replied charmingly, "Indeed. I was hoping we could tour the facilities together, and then we could meet to discuss any questions I might have." He gave her a telling grin. "Perhaps over dinner?" he hinted. He had always found that people were much more forthcoming in an unthreatening atmosphere.

She considered his offer. "If the tour goes longer than expected or if you have more questions than can be answered before then, perhaps."

He took it as a good sign that he had not been completely rebuffed. "I'm sure that you will find that I am likely to have a great many questions. I take mergers of this nature quite seriously, so naturally I want to ensure that this merger is mutually beneficial." He rose to his feet and gestured towards the door. "If you would lead the way."

During the rather extensive tour, he tried not to let his mind wander too much. He knew that he had to focus on the tour since he was the one who had decided to do this alone. Thoughts of Hermione could wait until he was back at the hotel.

The general state of the factory was satisfactory. In one of the main smelteries he observed the workers, who poured the pewter into iron molds in one room, then passed them to those who then rolled and cut more pewter into shapes, which were later molded into objects by magical artisans for attaching to the cauldron. Lucius admired the well-honed skill of the artisans who took the sheets of pewter and molded them into shapes by using a mallet made of leather as well as wood or metal tools. In another area, Elsa explained how the workers were magically spinning the flat discs of pewter to create the desired objects. The discs of hot pewter were secured onto a lathe and then by magically spinning the disc over a metal or wooden mold to give it its shape while they bent the pewter to their will. In another section, workers were soldering various pieces of pewter together, such as affixing a handle to the pot, spouts or feet.

When the pewter objects were finished they were taken to another location to be polished and buffed to given the cauldron the desired finish, then it was finally sent to the packing and shipping house."

He could see a few minor inefficiencies in the manufacturing process, but nothing that should have caused the level of difficulty it appeared Elsa was having with the running of her company. He presumed that would come to light when they began reviewing the books. The formal review of the books would wait until tomorrow, but he would try to glean some information from her over dinner. He would keep the conversation before dinner to safe and boring topics concerning the business of cauldron making. He wanted her relaxed so that she would agree to share dinner with him, and he did not want her on guard.

They lunched in the cafeteria with the workers, something that caught him slightly off balance, but that also proved to be quite enlightening. He found himself wishing he had brushed up on his German, but he caught several snippets of conversation here and there while they ate. Overall, it appeared that the workers seemed content, though he did pick up some underlying fear about the future of the company.

Late afternoon, they finished their tour. "I hope you found the tour enlightening, Mr. Malfoy," Elsa said cordially as they entered her office, her shadow Weiss following them.

"Quite so," Lucius replied. He had hoped that they could speak alone. "I saw a few things worthy of further discussion. Of course some of that discussion will only occur if the merger is finalized," he said with a slight tilt of his head and a warm, yet knowing smile.

Elsa took a seat in a chair in the lounge area of her office and indicated that Lucius should take the opposite chair. "And did you see anything that would put that merger in jeopardy?"

He found himself thinking that it would be decent to offer him some sort of beverage, and he was still a bit disconcerted by Weiss standing near the door. "Not as of yet," he replied honestly. He had known that any such indications would be most likely to happen while reviewing the assets and the financial history of the company as well as determining if there were any foreseeable liabilities he'd have to face and whether it would be prudent to have the company remain a separately run and operated subsidiary. "Of course I think we both know that my preliminary inspection is a bit of a formality. If I did not think that our companies had complementary interests, I would not be pursuing this merger." It was technically an acquisition, but he knew that she would feel more at ease if she was treated more as an equal.

When he saw her relax, he started asking her questions about the manufacturing process that had been raised during the tour, but had been impractical to ask at the time due to the ambient noise level. He found himself impressed by her level of knowledge. She clearly knew quite a bit about the process of making cauldrons, which was a good sign for the leadership of the company. It became apparent to him that her difficulties could lie in the marketing and financial side of the business.

He would have to charm her over to dinner. "Forgive me, Frau Schwartz, but it is getting late, and as I am unfamiliar with the local dining establishments, perhaps we could continue this discussion over dinner."

She gave the barest glance to Weiss before replying, "Of course, Mr. Malfoy, though I think that perhaps we should be less formal."

"Of course, Elsa and I would be delighted if you called me Lucius," he said, smiling warmly at her. "I will naturally defer to your judgment on where we should dine this evening. As I've said, I am not familiar with Frankfurt."

Returning his smile, she replied, "I know just the place."

"Excellent." Lucius rose and offered her his arm, looking forward to an evening of flirting, flattery and learning the truth about Schwarz Kesselwerks.

Note: Information on how pewter items are made came from http://www.ehow.com/how-does_4709595_pewter-get-made.html (remove the space). Many thanks again to my wonderful beta beawesley2 for providing this information and so much more.

Also, it's one of those strange coincidences that I chose Elsa for Ms. Schwartz's first name as this was written about 6 months before Frozen came out. Just one of those good Nordic/Germanic names. :)

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 29

Hermione and Ron survive the rest of their vacation, but how will he take her announcement about her new career choice?

Chapter 10

The rest of the weekend at the Merlin Resort progressed somewhat more pleasantly. After he found Hermione by the fountain, they had returned to the bungalow to decide what they wanted to do. Hermione had decided not to be pushy and pointed out a few of the activities she thought he might enjoy. She was disappointed that he did not choose something romantic like the sunset sail, but she hoped that they could at least share a romantic dinner, something that had not happened the previous evening. Fishing had most definitely not made her list of things to do, but she was willing to go along to spend time with Ron, though honestly it would not have made much difference if she had stayed behind. If she got too close to him, she was told she was crowding him. If she tried to engage him in conversation, she was told she was scaring the fish away. While he might have found the activity enjoyable, she most certainly did not.

After a light lunch, Ron decided he wanted to try sailboarding. At least for this activity she could relax on the beach and read her book. She would glance up at him from time to time, and he seemed to be enjoying himself. Perhaps this would put him in a better mood for dinner.

When he tired of sailboarding they returned to the bungalow where he announced he was exhausted and needed a nap before dinner. Hermione managed not to heave a sigh or roll her eyes at him, but rather than stay cooped up in the bungalow, she decided to go for a walk around the resort. As she walked through the gardens, she found herself wishing that Ron was with her, that they could talk about anything and nothing at all like she had with Lucius. It felt as though while Ron was physically at the resort with her, he was not mentally with her. They were essentially different, with very disparate ideas and preferences. As she pondered her loneliness, she realized it had been that way for a long time. She had just never noticed because they would both get engrossed in their work. Spending the previous week with Lucius, she had realized there was an intimacy missing from her marriage. She thought that maybe over dinner tonight would be the perfect time to try to regain that intimacy.

For dinner that evening he let her choose the restaurant as long as they served a great steak. She knew just the place to take him and even suggested a wine for him to try with his meal.

"Is that something you learned here?" he asked curiously.

Hermione couldn't contain her excitement. "I did. I was able to have a wine tasting lesson with the sommelier. It was very informative."

"Of course it was," Ron said quietly.

Hermione heard his comment and tried to smile as pleasantly as possible. He just couldn't understand how she could find something educational entertaining. She had hoped that wine might provide the spark to start a good conversation, but apparently she was mistaken.

After an uncomfortable silence, Ron asked, "So what kind of stuff did you do while here on your own?"

Hermione launched into an excited, and edited, recount of what she had been doing at the resort. She had hoped it would spur a conversation with him, but he gave little more than single word responses. But perhaps he would use this conversation to make his decision as to what activity they would do tomorrow morning before returning to London.

Throughout the rest of dinner, they managed to piece together a stilted conversation. The only saving grace of the evening was that Ron did not bring up her desire to change her career or the question of when they would start a family. Nevertheless, Hermione could not help comparing the evening to the ones she had shared with Lucius. She had just never realized how far apart she and Ron had grown, and he seemed to be resisting efforts to come closer together.

Before returning to the bungalow, they shared a moonlit walk on the beach, neither one of them saying much, just soaking in the beauty of the night and the gentle crash of the waves on the beach. Hermione thought it was quite a romantic end to the evening as they retired to the privacy of their bungalow.

The morning before they returned to London, the tension between the two of them was a little less than it had been previously, though she thought that some of that could be attributed to her decision to quit her Ministry job. She wasn't entirely looking forward to returning to her job because she would have to decide when her last day of work there was going to be. And she was going to be faced with Harry having the same sort of reaction that Ron had. And probably the rest of the Weasley family.

Her mind was made up, though, and the only thing that would change it was if someone could provide her with proof that Lucius was rising up to be the next all-powerful Dark wizard something she had gotten no indication of over the last week. She found her mind drifting to memories of pleasant conversations and long walks on the beach, and she forced herself to focus on the present.

As Hermione and Ron left the resort, she was definitely feeling a little down. After all, she had just spent an amazing week there rediscovering the ability to relax, and now she was returning back to the drudgery of real life. She could definitely see why this was a favorite place for Lucius to vacation. She would have to find a way to return for another visit.

Even though it did not feel as late as it was when they returned home, Hermione knew that it would hit her tomorrow if she did not try to get a good night's rest. Ron did not seem to care when she said she wanted to go to bed early and did not join her which somewhat surprised her.

Having gotten used to Bahamas time, she needed a few mind-clearing exercises before she could fall asleep.

The next morning, she was greeted with the anticipated pile of paperwork. She spent most of the morning prioritizing the pieces of parchment based on who sent them and what they were for. Knowing that she had her interview at two, she decided to work through lunch so that it would not seem like she was slacking, though she did find her mind drifting to how much longer she would have to be working here. She knew that would be one of the questions asked at the interview, and while the job was all but assured, she did not feel comfortable submitting her resignation until it was official. If something happened and for some reason she did not get the job, she knew that Ron would not be supportive of her looking for another position outside of the Ministry.

Finally the time came for her to leave for the interview, and she slipped out of her office, hoping that her absence would not be noticed. The one nice thing about being a witch was that you could travel places almost instantaneously through Apparition or Floo. That meant that she would not have to set aside half an hour for travel to her destination.

She arrived at the Malfoy Industries hiring manager's office about five minutes early, which gave her time to compose her thoughts. She did not know how vigorous an interview this was going to be, but she was prepared.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Weasley. I'm Hiram Grey, Hiring Manager," he said professionally as he offered her his hand.

"Mr. Grey, a pleasure to meet you," she replied cordially.

He led her into his office and offered her the seat on the far side of the desk. He picked up a piece of parchment on his desk and perused it. "You come very highly recommended, and you have done some outstanding work at the Ministry. Why might you be leaving that job?"

"Well, I have found the Ministry job a bit stifling. They have certain expectations about what you should be doing at certain points in your career. Because I am early in my career, I feel that my suggestions are not being weighted as much as they should. I'd like to work someplace where my opinions and ideas are respected." She hoped he found that a good answer.

"Yes, we have heard that before. The Ministry does have very well-defined positions for people. I think that you will find things very different here. I have been informed that you have an interest in Potions, even though that has not been your area of expertise the last five years. Is this something that you would like to pursue?"

Hermione blushed slightly; that had been something she'd mentioned in passing to Lucius, and was surprised that it had been brought up at her interview. "It is. Even though I haven't been working with potions, I do keep up with the latest journals and brew remedies for minor ailments for my family, so I'm not completely out of practice." She hoped that didn't sound overly eager. She did realize that it was not as though she would be heading up the entire Potions Research Department and that she would have to begin as an apprentice, but she did not want to sound like someone who was completely incompetent.

"Your N.E.W.T. scores are quite impressive across the board and there is of course the practical knowledge you exhibited during what would have been your seventh year at Hogwarts." He paused a moment as he looked through the papers on his desk. "Are there any other reasons you would like to work for Malfoy Industries?"

"I think I have a lot to offer the company, and I know that I can learn a great deal working here. It would be a wonderfully challenging opportunity to finally make a difference in the wizarding world."

"Indeed it would." He scribbled a few notes before returning his attention to her. "If you could wait in the outer office for a few minutes, the head of the Potions Research Department will meet with you to conduct the final part of your interview."

He rose and extended his hand, and Hermione did the same. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Grey," she replied politely before returning to the outer office.

After a fifteen minute wait, she was called back into the office where she was introduced to Aristotle Barnes, the head of the Potions Research Department. He spent about half an hour asking her various questions about potions and ingredients, obviously trying to ascertain her knowledge level. She felt quite confident about the answers she provided, even the ones that required analytical thinking and not just regurgitating what could be learned from a textbook. After all, there were many times she had helped Neville recover his potions in class, so she did possess the more intuitive knowledge of potions and ingredients that would be required in a research setting.

When Aristotle finished questioning her, she was dismissed for a few minutes while he and Mr. Grey conferred. Even though Hermione had been assured by Lucius that she would be hired, she was still feeling apprehensive about what the two men would be discussing behind closed doors.

After ten minutes, Mr. Grey summoned her to return to his office. She found that he was once again alone.

Once she was settled in her chair, he said, "You are a very well qualified candidate to work for Malfoy Industries. Of course there will need to be final approval from Mr. Malfoy before you can be hired, but as he is the one who recommended you, I don't think that will be an issue." He straightened the notes he had on her into a neat pile. "Now then, when can you start?"

"Well, the Ministry requires two months' notice..."

He held up his hand. "That may be standard, but we may be able to work something out so that you won't have to wait the full two month period, if that's what you desire," he said while giving her a smile.

She should have expected as much since she had ascertained that Lucius had regained much of the power he had once had in the wizarding world. She considered the offer. She really did not want to work for the Ministry for another two months, not when she had a much better job waiting for her. "Oh, thank you," she replied a tad too eagerly. "Yes, I'd appreciate that, however, it would probably take me two to three weeks to transfer the projects I'm working on to others in my department, so three weeks would be a good time." She thought that sounded fair. And even though Lucius had suggested that she take some time off before starting, she had just taken a week of vacation and really did not need any more time to unwind, especially since she was reasonably sure that Ron would not be able to get time off. Besides, she had already learned that vacationing by yourself was not that much fun, and the idea of taking some sort of tour with a bunch of strangers did not appeal to her.

"I'll send an owl to your residence when I have final approval for your hire, since I presume that sort of message might not be welcome at work. As to your starting date, we'll plan on three weeks, but if that has to change, it can be accommodated. Please send notification to myself and to Mr. Barnes," he said. He then rose to his feet and offered her his hand.

"Thank you, Mr. Grey. And thank you for your discretion. I will look forward to your owl," she said, trying to control her emotions. Even though she had presumed the job to be hers, she had still been a bit nervous at the interview.

As she walked out of the building, she had a spring in her step. She was about to be freed from the Ministry. She still was not exactly sure what she would be doing in the Potions Research Department, but it had to be better than what she had been doing at the Ministry, and a lot more rewarding. After all, Lucius seemed to respect her intellect, and she doubted that she would be lingering in a tedious and unfulfilling job.

When she returned to her office, she was surprised to see Ron there. "Ron? What are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd stop by and see if you wanted a cup of tea or something, you know, take a break. I figured you'd be swamped after a week away."

She was sure that was not the entire truth, but neither of them wanted to mention the real reason he was there in front of her coworkers. "That's very sweet of you, but I just got back from break. They might not appreciate me leaving again." She looked over at Conrad Milkin, hoping for confirmation.

"I think we can live without you for another fifteen minutes," he replied.

She could have cursed him for that, but was forced to be cordial about his offer. "Thanks, Conrad."

Realizing she no longer had an excuse, she left with Ron to the cafeteria. He chose a table in the far corner where Harry was waiting for them, and once they were seated he cast the Muffliato Charm.

"So, you're back from your interview?" Ron prompted.

She sighed. "Yes, I am, and it went very well. I think I'm going to get the job," she replied defensively before he could ask.

"And you're going to take it?" Harry asked pointedly.

"I told Ron I would. It's a good opportunity for me, and I'm not going to pass it up. I don't know when this sort of opportunity might present itself again," she said firmly.

"But Hermione, this is Malfoy we are talking about," protested Harry.

"I had this discussion with Ron. And I presume the two of you have been trying to dig up dirt on him all morning?" She looked between the two of them, and they both looked away from her. "And clearly you didn't find anything, so what's the problem?"

"Hermione, he's too clean," said Ron. "I mean his record is perfect. No one has a record that perfect. Everyone makes mistakes. How do we know he isn't falsifying records?"

"And how do you know he is?" she shot back, fed up with Ron treating her like an idiot incapable of making a decision. "Isn't it possible that his record is so clean because he knew it would be so heavily scrutinized? If someone was watching your every step, wouldn't you be very careful? Or, just maybe, he's exactly as he seems, *reformed* and an astute business man who is trying to be an upstanding member of society. I assure you both, that I'm not making a mistake. This is what's going to be for the best for *me*. I thought long and hard about this. After all, I had most of a week by myself to think about this." Ron averted his gaze, but she pressed on, "Why can't either of you trust my judgment? It's never been a problem in the past."

"That's because you always made sense in the past," said Harry. "This just doesn't make sense. He's been one of the biggest bigots in the wizarding world..."

Hermione cut him off by slamming her hands on the table. "Yet he has obviously changed because he has put Muggle-borns in very senior positions. I told Ron this same thing. And if he had not changed, why would he want to hire me?"

"Because of who you are," said Ron. "Face it, we're all war heroes, and there is a lot of prestige in having one of us work for someone. I know that we all got a lot of job offers in the beginning."

"The war has been over for five years, and I think that prestige has really become minimal. After the first year the articles and job offers really stopped," she reminded them, trying her best to maintain her patience and ignore the stares they were getting from the few other people present.

Harry said, "We just want you to be careful and remember who you are working for. We don't want to see you just being used or anything."

"Being *used* as if I'm *not* being used *here*?" While she appreciated his concern, it was getting to be a little much. "I'm always careful. I've always been the most prepared of the three of us. Does that make you feel any better?"

Ron looked sheepish again, knowing she was right. "A little, but I know that Harry and I would appreciate you deciding to work somewhere else."

"Well, I've decided that is where I want to work. It's going to be the best for me career-wise, and I think it's going to be a lot less stressful. And should you two find something suspicious, I'll rethink my decision, but as of right now I see no reason why I shouldn't work for Malfoy Industries. And honestly, the way you two are behaving is just as prejudicial as he was guilty of behaving before the war."

They were reluctantly forced to agree with her. "Just be careful," Harry said before giving her shoulder a quick squeeze and leaving her and Ron at the table.

She looked into Ron's eyes. "I know what I'm doing. I just need you to trust me." The two of them had always trusted her implicitly in the past, and she could not understand their refusal to do so now.

"I do, Hermione. I told you that already," Ron said.

"Then prove it. If it's Malfoy you don't trust, you should bring it up with him," she suggested, knowing full well that he would not since he had no proof of any wrong doing. "Now, I should be getting back to work," she said as she rose to her feet. "I'll see you later."

As she returned to her office, she resolved to leave work on time. She was not sure when the owl would arrive, and she wanted to be home to receive it in case Ron decided he needed to check any message coming from Malfoy Industries.

The rest of her day seemed quite tedious, and she had to force herself to concentrate. After all, she anticipated submitting her resignation tomorrow. In fact, she was starting to form the letter in her mind not that it really had to have a lot of details, but she did not want to burn any bridges when she left.

Ron arrived home not long after she did, though she was not surprised. She was surprised, however, when he did not immediately try to talk her out of taking the job with Malfoy Industries. Perhaps she had finally gotten through his thick skull.

That all changed when the owl arrived. Hermione heard the tapping at the window and leapt out of her chair to let the owl in. It landed on the back of a chair and presented her its leg. As soon as she had removed the letter, it took off, not even begging for a treat like most post owls. This did not really surprise her. She had to think that Malfoy held his owls to a rather high standard.

From behind her, Ron asked, "Well, did you get it?"

She jumped, not having noticed that he was standing behind her. Turning so that she was facing him, she opened the letter. "Let me see." Even though she logically knew that the letter was going to tell her that she did get the job, her heart was still racing. She was a bit disappointed to see that it was from Mr. Grey and not from Lucius, even though she knew that a personal letter from him would raise some suspicions.

She grinned at what she read. He once again praised her interview skills and mentioned that they looked forward to having her as part of the Malfoy team.

Looking up at Ron, she said cheerfully "I did get the job and I can start in two weeks." She gave him a hearty celebratory hug that he did not fully reciprocate.

"And what are you going to be doing?" he asked curiously.

She checked the letter again, not having bothered to read that far ahead. "I'm going to be in the Potions department, but I can always put in for a transfer if it's not to my liking."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure that would go right through," replied Ron sarcastically.

She could only assume that he was thinking of the Ministry where you generally were not transferred between departments until you reached upper management. "I imagine it would. It's in the best interest of the company that employees be where they would be most productive. This is the private sector; it's not like working for the Ministry. And that's why I'm taking the job," she replied definitely as she crossed her arms.

When he decided not to brook any further argument, she said, "Why don't we go out and celebrate. I'm not in the mood to cook anymore."

He considered her a few seconds before saying, "Why not? After all, you said this job did come with a raise, right?"

"That's right," she replied simply, not pleased that he was once again focusing on the money.

As they got ready to leave, he asked, "So, how much of a raise?"

She had not actually intended on telling him, and she wasn't entirely sure why. Mostly because the monetary compensation was the least important part of her decision to take this job. It could have come with a pay cut and she still would have taken it. She took hold of his arm and said, "Double," before Side-Along Apparating to their dinner location.

It took him a few moments to get his bearings once they arrived, having just suffered a double shock. "Did you say double?" he sputtered.

"Yes, Ron, I did. I told you I was being overworked and underpaid at the Ministry, that they didn't appreciate my talents. Well, Malfoy Industries clearly does."

"That they do." He looked up to see where she had taken him. "You just got a whopping raise and we're going to eat here? This place is a dump!"

She knew he was exaggerating and that the thought of her new salary was clouding his mind. "Yes. I like this place, and I think it's the perfect place for me to celebrate my new beginning."

"It's your celebration," he acquiesced, though she could tell he wished they were going out someplace fancier.

"Besides, we aren't dressed for a really nice place," she replied as she hooked her arm in his and led him inside for a celebratory dinner.

A/N: As always, many thanks to beawesley2 for her assistance as my faithful beta.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 29

Hermione is excited about her new job. Ron... not so much.

Chapter 11

Hermione's resignation had been met with little resistance. She had told them that she thought there were better challenges and opportunities for her working outside the Ministry. The head of her department had tried to compel her to give him two months' notice to replace her, but Hermione politely turned him down, knowing that he'd already acquiesced to her leaving after the month was over, but the one that hurt the most was the small argument she'd had with her division head and direct supervisor, who had both tried to convince her to stay, but she had ended that by letting them know that she already had a job. She then spent the rest of her week transferring her projects to others in the department a very onerous task since she was involved in so many projects. She had never realized how many until she started divvying them up. It was no wonder that she had always been exhausted.

Once that was done, she spent her time helping out where she could and trying her best to let go and not surrender to the urge to regain control of any of her old projects. The Thursday of her second week, her boss, Madame Crowley called Hermione to her office.

"You wanted to see me?" Hermione asked as she stood in the doorway.

"Yes, Hermione. Please, have a seat." Once Hermione was seated Crowley continued. "I know that you gave us your notice and expected to be working here for another couple of weeks, but there really isn't a reason for you to come in anymore. Since you have quite a bit of leave, why don't you take some of those days to finish up your two weeks? I think it would be best for everyone. You'll be able to wrap everything up by tomorrow, won't you?"

"Of course," Hermione replied with a heavy heart. While she had been told that it was likely she would not have to stay at the Ministry the entire thirty days of her notice, she was still surprised to see it happening. "I just wanted to thank you for everything, for the opportunities you gave me and the faith you placed in me."

"It was a pleasure having you work here. I literally don't know what I'm going to do without you. I've never seen someone work so hard before. You'll be missed."

Hermione was a bit stunned by the praise since Madame Crowley did not normally give her workers that sort of acknowledgement. "Thank you," Hermione replied and then got to her feet and shared a handshake.

Late Friday morning, Hermione was collecting the last of her things when Madame Crowley asked her to come with her to the break room. Hermione was quite surprised to see her coworkers there to farewell her. There was a small cake and some tea for everyone. She had never been that close to her coworkers, so this was truly a pleasant surprise.

After the party, Hermione put the last of her personal belongings in her satchel and walked through the atrium for the last time as a Ministry employee. It was the oddest feeling she'd had, well, besides walking out of Hogwarts for the very last time as a student.

It was still early and she did not really want to go home yet, so she decided to go to the library.

While at the library, she found she was just staring at the books. She was trying to decide what she was going to do for the next two weeks. She supposed she could always contact Mr. Grey about starting earlier than she had previously mentioned, but she thought that might be unprofessional. And there was the fact that she was still technically employed by the Ministry. That probably wouldn't sit well with anyone.

She did know that she was going to be involved in Potions research, so she could spend that time in the library polishing up her Potions knowledge and maybe even brewing some potions at home. That wasn't something she did very often, only when someone was ill.

Feeling better about what she was going to do with herself, Hermione wandered over to the Potions section and started browsing the books, looking for ones that struck her fancy. She selected half a dozen books and checked them out of the library.

Once at home she curled up in her favorite chair with the books and a notebook.

By the time Ron got home, she was fully immersed into Potions mode and had two different cauldrons going to make bases for various Potions.

"What... in Merlin's name is going on here?" he asked after he got over the shock of having found his living room turned into a Potions lab.

"Oh, Ron, is it that late already?" she asked she moved a stray lock of hair out of her face and tucked it behind her ear. "I completely lost track of time."

"I gathered," he said dryly. "What are you doing home?"

"Well, I managed to turn over all my work, and they decided it would be best if I used some of my accrued leave rather than sitting around the office doing nothing. I just decided I might as well brush up on my Potions since I didn't have anything else to do," she replied with a shrug.

"By turning the house into a Potions lab?" he asked sarcastically.

"I... guess I just got a bit carried away. I really had not intended it to get this far, but I had a few ideas I wanted to try out, and well... It sort of got away from me, didn't it?" With a few swishes of her wand, she cleaned up the worst of the mess. Normally she wouldn't leave ingredients lying around like she had, but her mind had been moving at a million miles an hour, and she had gotten sloppy. Back in school they were generally working on a single, well-defined potion, not doing the sort of experimenting she was planning.

"And you're going to do this until you go back to work?" he asked cautiously.

"I never mean for it to get this messy. I can I promise not to get so carried away. It's just that I was making some potions bases. Now that those are pretty much stable and settled out, I can contain it much better. Give me about fifteen minutes to clean everything up, and then we can do something simple like spaghetti for dinner," she offered.

Ron did not look like he was in a mood to argue with her. "Sounds fine to me. I think I'm going to shower and change. Things got a little messy at work."

She finally really looked at him and saw that he was indeed covered with something. "Oh, sorry to hear that. Anything too bad?" she asked sympathetically as she sorted things out on the transfigured coffee table.

"No. Just one of those days where you run into some guy who fancies himself the next Dark Wizard yet is really an idiot who couldn't charm his shoes tied. Nothing we couldn't handle. I'll let you clean this up," he said as he gestured at her mess.

It did not take Hermione long to clean up the rest of the mess and get the noodles cooking on stove. She longed to talk to Ron about her experiments, but she knew that his interest in Potions was basically non-existent.

Hermione spent the next two weeks working on various Potions theories. Most of them fizzled and a few even did so dramatically, making her thankful that she could use to magic to clean it up, and that they lived in a magical neighborhood where this sort of accident was not completely unheard of. Although she did ruin the carpet, not that she really minded staining the old thing. She'd meant to replace it years ago.

Fortunately there was no real damage to the house, her belongings or herself. There were some other theories she wanted to test, but she knew that they would be better tested in a real Potions lab. The closer she got to beginning her new job, the more excited she became. If she wasn't working on a theory, she was in the library conducting research. She had no idea what sort of projects she might be assigned, but it had been liberating to actually conduct research rather than work on bland reports.

She started to wonder why she had waited so long to leave the Ministry and why she had not considered anything else in the first place. She could only surmise that it was because she had been so naïve about the ways of the wizarding world. She could not be sure that having spent a seventh year at Hogwarts would have made a difference, but she at least would have had her professors available for mentoring.

Finally, it was Friday and she needed to start picking up her experiments. She had promised Ron that the house would be clean for the weekend and that she would also visit his family. She was not entirely looking forward to facing the whole Weasley clan now that she would be starting work at Malfoy Industries on Monday. So far she had been able to avoid Arthur, and on her previous visit to the Potter's, Ginny had oozed disapproval, even though she had not actually said anything negative. George had not immediately disapproved, but he had not sounded enthusiastic either when she had mentioned her new job. She had at least hoped for his support, but then again she knew he would not want to be at odds with his family.

But she had promised and Ron had gotten much better about not criticizing her decision to change jobs. She had asked Ron to talk to his family and see if they could spend the day together without conversation centering on her, but he had refused and she knew it would be hard if not impossible for them to resist.

Hermione had grinned and stoically bore it for three hours at the Burrow. It had been difficult, but she had managed. Everyone had wanted to voice their opinion about

her decision to work for Malfoy Industries. As she had expected, Ron had not really said anything to support her decision, and it had made her feel horrible that her husband would not defend her or even make the slightest attempt of supporting her.

When they returned back to their flat, she went to the bedroom and started getting ready for bed. She did not want to discuss the evening with Ron because she was reasonably sure she would say things that she would regret.

"Hermione," Ron started as he came into the bedroom.

"Ron, just... don't. I don't want to talk about it. I just want to go to bed." She knew it was still early and that she was not likely to fall asleep anytime soon, but it was the best way to avoid him for the evening.

He wisely decided that this would be a good time to listen to her. He grabbed his pillow and headed toward the living room.

She knew that if she left the light on to read that he would eventually want to come talk. She heard voices and knew he'd turned on the Wireless. Rolling over, she tried to beat her pillow into submission before she was finally able to get comfortable and try to clear her mind of all the stress she had experienced that day. It took her a long time to finally fall into slumber.

Sunday was just as tense as Saturday had been. That morning Ron had mumbled something about Harry and slinked out the door. That actually made Hermione more angry that he was taking the easy path of getting out of the house rather than actually trying to understand her feelings. She should not have been surprised because he generally tried to avoid any sort of conversation that centered on her emotions or emotional needs. She snorted. Ron hadn't grown up at all; he still had the emotional range of a teaspoon, just like she'd commented in fifth year.

She decided to spend the day getting ready for her new job. Of course, it did not take long since all she had to do was decide what to wear and pack her notes. She was not sure she would need her notes since she had no idea what her actual role in the Potions Division would be, but it was always prudent to be prepared. She did go out for a bit to purchase some comfortable loafers and some thick cotton socks, since she'd assumed she'd be standing most of her workday.

The flat was empty when she came home. Feeling at a loss, she chose a novel, made a cup of tea and curled up in her favorite chair.

Dinner approached and Ron still had not returned home. Hermione was reasonably sure that he would sneak in late, after he presumed she would be in bed. That actually suited her just fine since she had no desire to get into one last row with him over her working for Malfoy Industries. Rather than cooking just for herself, she decided to head out and grab a quick bite to eat in Diagon Alley.

As she walked down the Alley, she met George walking the other way. "Hi, Hermione," he replied cordially.

"Hello, George," she replied, giving him a wan smile and bracing for whatever might come next.

"Where's Ron?" George asked as he noticed that she was alone.

"He's still in a snit over my new job, and he's gone into hiding," she replied honestly. George had been the only Weasley to really support her.

"Sorry to hear that. He can be quite a git sometimes. We tried, but well, it's Ron," he replied with a shrug.

"Very true," she replied with a sigh, but she appreciated his attempt at humor.

"Why don't you join us for dinner? I know Angelina would love to have you over, and it'll be better than eating alone," he replied, guessing why she was out in Diagon Alley at this hour on a Sunday.

She smiled at him. "Thanks. I'd like that." She then turned around and fell in step with him. As they walked back to his flat above his store, he told her about some of the new products he was considering. He had always enjoyed bouncing ideas off of her. She didn't always approve of them since some could be used to skive classes, but she knew how much George loved his work.

Dinner with George, Angelina and little Fred was pleasant. They managed to talk about everything but her new job and neither of them was judgmental about her choice. "Good luck tomorrow," George said as the evening wrapped up and Hermione got ready to leave.

"I know you'll be brilliant," added Angelina.

"Thanks, you two. That means a lot to me. No one else seems to think this is a good idea," she replied as she gave Angelina a hug.

"Well, no one thought me and Fred leaving Hogwarts was a good idea, but look how that turned out. Following your heart can't be a bad thing, I say," waxed George philosophically.

"So very true. If only the rest of your family believed that," she replied sadly.

George gave her a reassuring hug. "Just give them time. They'll come around when they see how happy this makes you. After all, once Fred and I became successes, Mum came around. See you later, Hermione," he said as he released her so that she could leave.

Both of them wishing her luck on her first day of work had left her with a spring in her step. She felt better than she had since returning from vacation. It had been so nice to hear people supporting her decision rather than trying to talk her out of it. Maybe she should have Ron spend some time with George and Angelina so they could talk some sense into him?

As she thought about Ron, she really hoped that his plan was to wait until late to return home. She knew that getting into it with him would just ruin her good mood, and she really wanted to take this mood to bed.

Thankfully, Ron had stuck by his predictable plan. She sighed in relief when she realized the house was hers. Rather than staying up late and tempting fate, she decided to head to bed so that she would be well rested for tomorrow.

A/N: As always my undying gratitude to my beaweesley2 who helps make this a better story. I could do it without her, but there would be big gaping holes a Norwegian Ridgeback could fly through. :)

Chapter 12

Hermione is excited to finally be starting a job where her talents will be appreciated.

Hermione stood outside the non-descript building, one of Lucius Malfoy's many properties, in a section of London where wizarding businesses tended to be located. She was incredibly nervous about starting a new job. Everyone would know who she was and would expect great things of her. She was sure she could deliver on those great things, but it certainly did put a lot of stress on her.

She strode in and walked up to the reception desk. "Good morning, I'm Hermione Weasley and I start work today," she said brightly.

The receptionist looked down at a list on her desk before looking up at her. "You are expected. If you'll have a seat, Mr. Davies will be with you shortly."

Hermione tried not to look nervous as she waited on the hard and uncomfortable bench. She had to force herself not to tap her feet. The building was as non-descript on the inside as it was on the outside, so there was not much for her to look at. She knew that pulling out her notes and looking at them probably would not be a good idea. Of course, she could be waiting here a lot longer than she thought, but she did her best to be patient.

There was one other wizard waiting on the bench. She assumed he was also starting work. They shared nervous smiles. She introduced herself, and he mumbled a name that she could not understand. Deciding he was not interested in conversation, she resigned herself to waiting in silence. Not long after she arrived another wizard joined them. He likewise did not seem interested in conversation.

After only a few minutes of waiting, a grey-haired and slightly balding, middle-aged wizard walked out of the door on the left. "Good morning, everyone. Welcome to Malfoy Industries. I'm Mr. Davies, Head of Personnel and I'll be overseeing your orientation. It's a pleasure to have you all as new employees." He then shook each of their hands.

She rose and accepted his proffered hand. "A pleasure to be here," she replied.

"Good, good. Well, as I'm sure you can imagine, today will be your registration and orientation day. You will meet your coworkers, but I'm afraid that for the most part today won't be that interesting." He moved back a step. "If you'll follow me," he said and then led them back through door.

It didn't take long for Hermione to hate orientation day. First there was the obligatory welcome from the head of Potions' Research. Then there were all standard forms which she had expected to have to sign: the employee information sheet, the non-disclosure agreement, and of course the paperwork that dealt with who owned the rights to anything she developed on company time or based on company work. She had expected having to go through paperwork, but it made the ordeal no less tedious. Then she received her employee identification, complete with utterly unflattering picture, which was followed by a very dry presentation on the employee code of conduct and dress code. She tried not to look bored, but she could tell that those who were presenting them the information were not very enthused to be there. It reminded her of being in one of Professor Binns' lectures.

Finally it was time for them to get a tour of the facilities. That lasted about an hour with stops on the tour to introduce various people in the work groups to each of the new employees.

When they finished, they joined Mr. Davies back in the briefing room from that morning. "I hope that all of you are now familiar with how Malfoy Industries works. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to bring them up. Now, since the day is almost over, why don't all of you go home, and you can report to your work centers in the morning?"

While Hermione had hoped for a more productive first day, she realized that everything they had done had been for a reason. They were getting up when she heard a familiar voice address them from the door.

"I hope I'm not too late," said Lucius.

"Mr. Malfoy! What an unexpected surprise. You're just in time." Mr. Davies turned his attention back to the new employees. "Everyone, as I'm sure you already know, this is Mr. Lucius Malfoy, president of the company. And you should be honored that he has come here to speak to you."

"That's hardly necessary, Mr. Davies. I value my employees and try to welcome as many of them as I can." He shifted his gaze to each of the new hires, though Hermione thought his gaze lingered a bit longer on her. "All of you are working for one of the best companies in the world. This company is what it is because we only hire the brightest witches and wizards. And I expect nothing short of excellence from my employees. Outstanding performance is valued and as such can be greatly rewarded." He paused a few moments for a dramatic flair. "Anything less than outstanding... Well, I prefer not to dwell on the negative. And I would think that there would be no need to mention it to any of you."

Another pause as he once again evaluated his new employees. He smiled broadly and said, "Welcome to Malfoy Industries, everyone." He then stopped and shook everyone's hand, welcoming them by name and engaging in brief chit chat. He saved Hermione for last, after the others had left.

"So wonderful to see you here. I hope that your assignment will suit your interests," he said as he held onto her hand from the handshake.

She tried not to blush from the attention he was showing her. "I'm sure that it will. I've actually been preparing for it."

He laughed softly. "Why am I not surprised? If you find that you would prefer to work elsewhere in the company, please speak up and I will see that you are transferred."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary," she replied softly, not wanting to get special treatment.

He then released her hand, gave her one last smile and strode out of the room with a swish of his robes that made Hermione's heart flutter. She watched through the window, and he glanced over his shoulder at her before moving out of sight. After a few seconds she realized she was mooning over her boss and forced those thoughts out of her mind before Mr. Davies noticed. After all, she was a married woman and had no business thinking of him as anything other than her boss, not matter how suave and debonair he was.

When she returned home, she found that Ron was already there, which was odd. "Ron? Is something wrong?" she asked, noticing that his hand was bandaged.

"I got hit by a stinging hex. I've been to St. Mungo's for treatment, but they sent me home for the rest of the day."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she replied sincerely. She knew that if he had already been treated, there was little that she could do. By morning he should be back to normal, but it was one of those rare hexes that couldn't just be magically reversed. "Is there anything you would like for dinner?"

"Whatever you were planning," he replied noncommittally.

She went to put her things away and change out of her work robes. When she returned, she noticed he was watching her. Rather than say something she left the ball in his court.

Finally after a very long and uncomfortable silence, he asked, "So, how did your first day of work go?"

She shrugged. "It was an orientation day. I'm working in a group of five, but I didn't recognize any of them. They are all quite a bit older than me, so we didn't go to school

with any of them."

"Any idea what exactly you are going to be doing?" he asked curiously.

"Not at the moment, but you do realize that I won't really be able to talk about my work, don't you? It will all be proprietary."

"But you will tell me if you work on anything suspicious, won't you?" he asked provocatively.

She was immediately insulted that he would even think to ask her that question. "Ron! Honestly, if you think he's working on Dark Magic stuff, just raid his business and be done with it. I'm not going to be your spy trying to ferret out dirt." She set down a cooking pot on the stove more forcefully than she'd intended.

"Awfully defensive, aren't you?" he asked in a very professional tone, and to her it sounded as though he was doing his job and interrogating a suspect rather than talking to his wife.

"I'm not going to get into it with you again. We both know that you don't like the fact I chose to work for Malfoy Industries. Fine." She slammed down her cooking knife and turned to face him fully. "You'll just have to learn to live with it because I'm not planning on quitting any time soon. I think it's going to be a wonderful job, and I'm sick of these false accusations. By making them you insult me as much as you insult him. I would think that you would know that I would never work for a company of questionable legality. If you are going to insist on arguing this, you can fend for yourself for dinner. I'm not going to put up with it." She folded her arms and gave him a stern look.

He tried to look contrite. "Look, Hermione, I'm sorry. I just have a hard time trusting Malfoy, and Harry feels the same way. We just don't want to see you hurt or get in trouble with the law."

"If something illegal was going on, I think the Ministry would have figured it out by now. Ministry records show how heavily scrutinized his company is. I really doubt he could get away with anything even if he wanted to. So unless the Ministry opens an investigation and I'm called upon to testify, don't expect me to be telling you any dirt about anything going on at work, not that I expect there to be any. So just trust me."

"I really want to. Really," he replied apologetically, finally realizing he had crossed the line.

"Then do and drop this. I'm really sick of the topic." She lamented that if he put this much effort into their relationship, things would not be as rough between the two of them as they were.

He sighed. "I'll drop it."

She wasn't sure what to make of his statement, but he was saying the right words. Whether he meant them or not was a different matter. "Now, get some rest and I'll take care of dinner."

Normally she enjoyed cooking, but now that Ron had gotten her worked up, she really wasn't in the mood. But at least it got her into the other room so that they could both calm down. And to help her calm down, she decided to cook dinner without the use of magic other than to heat the stove. It seemed to make her feel better to use her hands to prepare food, probably because it was so close to Potions making.

Dinner and the rest of the evening were quiet and tense. While Hermione did not care for the tension, she relished the quiet. Perhaps she had finally gotten through to Ron. She hoped that in a few weeks, he would see how happy she was with her new job and that would permanently change his outlook.

Over the course of the next several weeks Hermione settled into her new routine. Her coworkers were pleasant to work with, and it hadn't taken them that long to get over the awe of working with one of the heroes of the war. While she had no formal Potions experience and had never really worked with others on the brewing of potions, since almost all of their Hogwarts work had been individually graded, she found that she had no problem working with them. They were all excellent brewers and more than willing to entertain her theories and answer her questions.

Their current main project was working on an elixir to treat dragon pox, one of the few diseases in the wizarding world that was generally fatal. While there was an older treatment, it was losing effectiveness for most afflicted. When she learned that was their project, she felt a pang in her heart. She knew that this was a project Malfoy Industries had taken on not because it was profitable, but because Lucius had lost Narcissa to that cruel disease.

She had spent the first week reviewing the research from the last three years. This team had only been working on the elixir for the last three months, and they were actually the third team to have been assigned this project none of the others had had any success.

Knowing how bittersweet succeeding in brewing the elixir would be for Lucius, she vowed not to let him down.

Hermione and the rest of her team were experimenting with many different theories to treat Dragon Pox, but not one of them succeeded. It was frustrating for her to not have immediate success, but the other members of the team helped her accept the fact that this sort of thing did not come quickly. Harold Prince, the oldest member of the team, told them of how he once worked on a project for ten years before there was success. And the Dragon pox treatment was not the only project they were working on. Everyone in the Potions Division believed that it was good to work on more than one project at a time to keep your mind sharp and to keep you from getting tunnel vision.

She wanted to work late, but her fellow team members, kept pushing her to go home, admonishing her that work could be continued in the morning. It took her a while to adapt to that mindset, but she eventually did come to realize that one did not have to complete everything in one day, and in fact most of the time, that was virtually impossible.

As she finally adapted to that mindset, she found herself better able to relax. Even Ron was forced to admit that her change of career had been beneficial. She did not snap at him near as much, was not as stressed out when she returned home from work and of course it helped that he had not mentioned having a family.

She really did have everything in life that she wanted. She was successful and happy at work, and she was happy at home. Leaving the Ministry was one of the best decisions she could have made.

Of course, a part of her was just waiting on tenterhooks for Ron to say or do something that would ruin the peace they were enjoying. He so far had not really mentioned her job much since she started working for Malfoy Industries. Clearly he was heeding her warning.

One evening Hermione had stayed on a rare occasion to work late. She hadn't timed her steps well and figured she had to work about an hour late to get the potion to a state in which it would sit overnight.

She had the door to her laboratory open and could hear the rest of the building emptying out. That suited her perfectly well because she worked better without the interruptions that naturally came about when you had dozens of people working in the same building.

"Working late?" came Lucius' voice from the door.

She jumped, not having heard him walking down the hallway. "What? Oh, Lucius!" She straightened up and hooked loose locks of hair over her ears. "Yes, I didn't time things out well, and I couldn't leave this for the night yet."

He looked at what she was doing. "For the dragon pox elixir?" he asked curiously.

She shook her head. "No, this is for something else," she replied as she got back to work, knowing that some of the steps were time sensitive.

He waited until she paused in her work. "And how is that going?"

She sighed. "Not well, though I'm sure you've seen Harold's reports."

"I have, but I'm asking you for your opinion," he replied simply.

"Dragon pox is a very strange disease. It really does seem to repel all efforts to penetrate it. We've got a couple of new theories and are trying to work out how to implement them. But I don't really know how much progress we are making. I'm learning that wizarding diseases are very different from the ones that affect Muggles, and that makes treating them that much more difficult."

He smiled warmly at her. "I have every faith that you are giving it your best effort." He placed his hand on her shoulder to reassure her.

"So what brings you around here so late?" she asked curiously.

"I like to randomly visit my holdings. I just happened to decide to come here this evening," he replied casually.

"Wouldn't it be better to come during the day when people are working?"

"I find you can learn quite a bit about people by observing how they leave their workspaces. It also discourages people from trying something illicit after hours if they know there is a reasonable chance that I might show up. My unpredictability keeps my employees on their toes," he replied playfully.

She laughed softly. "I can see that it would. Interesting that no one ever informed me of that."

"I think that's one of their secrets. The more tenured employees like to see one of the newer ones shaking in their boots when I arrive. Most do find me quite a menacing figure," he said imperiously.

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Oh, really?" she asked skeptically.

"You have seen a side of me that very few people have witnessed. I am not harsh, but I do demand excellence and those who cannot provide it... Well, they tend not to work for me for very long, and being let go by Malfoy Industries is not something that looks good on your CV since it is well known that I hire only the best." He casually leaned against the table where she was working.

She looked into his eyes for moment, starting to lose herself in the grey that was far warmer than she remembered it being. When she realized what she was doing, she forced herself to look away and consult her notes. "I don't mean to be rude, but I really do have to get this potion to a stable point before I leave."

He straightened up and bowed his head slightly. "My apologies. I am not used to encountering someone here at this hour. I will let you return to your work."

"Thank you, Lucius. And if this didn't require so much attention, I would be happy to chat with you." She felt that she had to explain herself a little better as she did not want him upset with her.

"I am very glad to hear that, my dear. I will continue my tour." He flashed her one last playful smile before leaving.

Just like before, she found herself watching him leave the room. There was something about the way he made an exit that seemed almost unreal. The way the fine wool of his robes swished was almost hypnotic.

Shaking her head to clear the wool from her mind, she returned her attention to her potion and saw that it was starting to turn a rather unpleasant green and that she had to hurry to keep it from being ruined.

Once she had the potion stable, she changed out of her lab robes and headed for the exit. As she walked through the empty corridors, a part of her hoped that she would run into Lucius again. She wasn't sure why, but she just enjoyed talking with him. They always seemed to have such interesting and stimulating conversations ones that did not involve someone like Mundungus Fletcher.

She was a little disappointed when she left the building without having seen Lucius. She knew that she should not be thinking that, but she couldn't help it.

When she returned home, Ron demanded, "Where have you been?"

She thought he sounded a little too adversarial considering she wasn't that late. "I mistimed a project and had to finish it before I could leave."

"For two hours?" he asked skeptically with his arms crossed.

"Yes, for two hours," she replied, though she had not realized it had really been that long.

"But you haven't had to work late before," said Ron suspiciously.

"No, not since I've started working for Malfoy Industries, I haven't. We have a lot going on in the lab, and I just didn't plan ahead properly. Even I make mistakes from time to time, Ron. It's something you are going to have to live with. And this is the first time I've worked late since I started, so what are you so upset about?" She really wanted to know what had caused this seemingly random outburst.

"You've been getting distant lately, and I was suspicious that you weren't home..."

What he left unsaid shocked her. "What? I've been distant lately?" It was her turn to be angry. "How can you possibly be implying that?" She could not believe what she had just heard. "How does one night working late translate into that?"

He ruffled his hair. "I don't know. It just seems like you aren't that interested in me anymore."

"Ron, I've just been thinking about work. I know that I don't bring work home, but I still can't help but think about it. I guess that's why I've been so distant. What we're working on is very complex and very confusing. The one project we are working on has been very difficult to crack, more so considering that several different groups have worked on it over the years without success. You know I don't like to fail."

"I know that, but you are always the one who pushed for conversation, but lately when I try to strike one up, you tend to ignore me."

She sighed. Her reason didn't have anything to do with work, but had everything to do with the fact that she just wasn't interested in what he wanted to talk about any more than he would want to discuss Potions. "Ron, neither one of us is really interested in the other's work, and we need to find things to talk about that aren't work related. I know you find some of your anecdotes humorous, but if you weren't there, they really aren't." She felt bad about telling him that, especially after he gave her a pained look. Reaching out she placed her hand on his arm. "I'm sorry I had to say that, but I thought you deserved the truth. And I know that you don't find any of my ramblings on potions or the other journals interesting."

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I didn't know you found them that bad," he replied, not hiding the hurt in his voice.

"They aren't that bad; it's just not something that interests me. We just need to find something that we both find interesting. Perhaps if you would read the Charms journal

or something that would help with having something to discuss," she prompted. She had long tried to get him interested in the Charms journal since she knew that it did have information he would find useful for work.

He took a moment before replying to her. "I've been thinking that we should try to find time to get away."

"Oh, Ron, that's a wonderful idea, but I have to work there for six months before I'm eligible for vacation," she replied, not wanting to dash his hopes.

"It doesn't have to be a vacation; just a weekend getaway would be good. I think we are both getting far too wrapped up on work, and this would be good for us." He looked at her hopefully.

"That would be a good idea. Why don't you pick the weekend that works best for you. I'm sure that I can arrange to leave a few hours early to give us a little longer weekend."

"I was thinking about the upcoming holiday. That would give us three days away from London, away from family, away from everything." He rubbed her arms as he talked about his plan.

Even though the holiday was weekend after next and it would not give them long to plan, she thought it was a grand idea. "I think that would work out just fine," she replied cheerfully.

"Great! I've found a great little cottage in Ireland that I think you would like. Seamus actually recommended it to me," he admitted. "It's real charming with a great location out in the country that would give us plenty of space and isolation. I've actually already made the arrangements," he admitted sheepishly.

Normally Hermione would have preferred to be consulted ahead of time, but she knew that Ron was very proud of his weekend getaway, and she didn't want to ruin it for him. "Thank you, Ron. I look forward to it."

Now that Ron's fears were assuaged, the rest of the evening went a lot better. They enjoyed dinner and actually had a wonderful evening together in front of the fire. Hermione knew that the Canons game was being broadcast on the Wireless, but Ron had chosen not to listen to it. She felt a little guilty for indulging in her Lucius Malfoy fantasy earlier, but she reasoned that nothing had ever happened between them and that nothing would.

When Ron and Hermione arrived at the cottage, she instantly fell in love. It was perfectly quaint and the surroundings perfectly bucolic. There was even a flock of sheep in a nearby field, just making the whole atmosphere perfect. "Ron, it's lovely!" She wrapped her arms around him and gave him a kiss.

"Thanks, though as I said, I can't take full credit. Seamus is the one who knew about this," he replied sheepishly.

"Well, you thank him for me. And of course you had to have talked about a getaway with him, so it wasn't all Seamus," she said to try to boost his confidence. She wanted this to be the perfect weekend.

Entering the cottage, she found that it was exactly as she would have imagined it to look. Ron stood behind her and said, "There is a cook in the main house who'll send meals over if we don't want to cook since this is vacation. If we do want to cook, we can just let them know what we need through the chalkboard."

"Mmmm... I don't think I want to cook," she said. While she normally found it relaxing, there was something wonderful about having someone else do it while you were on vacation.

He chuckled. "That's what I thought you'd say. We just have to let them know what time we want our meals through the chalkboard and they'll arrive on the table."

"That's utterly brilliant," she replied. It was much like how the house-elves served meals at Hogwarts and an elegant way to provide food for guests without intruding on their privacy.

Hermione could not be more pleased with Ron actually making an effort to do something romantic and succeeding spectacularly. She began to think that she had finally gotten through to him, helped him understand that a successful relationship took effort by both parties. She looked forward to spending a wonderfully relaxing weekend with him.

She wrapped him in a warm embrace and gave him a very passionate kiss. "Now, where's the bedroom?" she asked deviously.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 29

Lucius now has Hermione working for his company, but now what? His business life is busy and how could he pursue a married witch anyway?

Chapter 13

Having Hermione work for his company had not afforded Lucius as many opportunities to interact with her as he had initially anticipated. Yes, he had run into her working late one night well, that was not entirely true. He knew that she was working late and had decided it would be a good opportunity to visit his Potions Division.

But from those few minutes together, he could tell that she still enjoyed his company. He only wished they had had more time to talk, that he could have gotten a sense of where her relationship with Weasley stood.

He laughed at how suddenly impatient he felt. It had been three years since Narcissa's passing, and now he was acting as though there was some sort of magical deadline by which he had to find a new partner.

At least she seemed happy with her work. So far, he had every indication that she was quite happy both with her new position in his company and with his company as a whole. The reports on her job performance were excellent, as he had expected, and she seemed to have adjusted to the business practices he had instituted. It would have been to his advantage if she was encouraged to work late because he knew that she was the type of person who would probably do that every night, but it would not be to her advantage to do so and he knew that. Still, he found himself paying particular attention to the Potions Division in case she ever did work over, so he could have the opportunity to see her privately again.

He pushed those thoughts aside as the receptionist informed him Frau Schwartz was ready to see him. He rose and smiled warmly as he entered her office. "Elsa, it's always a pleasure to see you. Thank you for obliging my schedule, yet again." He was quite surprised that she was alone. During their previous meetings, Herr Weiss had always accompanied her.

"The pleasure is all mine. I see that you have more questions, and I hope that I can put your mind at ease," she said as she took her seat on the sofa.

"I'm sure that you can," he replied as he joined her. "Any business merger is always a complicated process, though I believe we have already covered the major issues and are now just down to the minor details."

They spent the next hour going over some of the details. Overall Lucius was feeling quite optimistic the merger would go through. She was open to making changes, clearly wanting her company to succeed, and this would provide the type of diversity he was lacking. Not that he expected further trouble, but for the last couple of years he had been pursuing overseas diversity as insurance against further unrest.

"Forgive me, Lucius, it has been a long and tiring day, and I would prefer if we could continue this discussion over dinner," Elsa said as she leaned back and placed her hand on her chest.

Lucius unconsciously followed her hand and found himself staring at her chest and quickly looked away when he realized what he was doing. He thought it was a marvelous idea to get them out of her stuffy office and into more pleasant surroundings. "Of course. I will once again defer to your judgment on where we should dine."

She chose a very well appointed restaurant where they were led to a secluded table so they could discuss their business privately. At first the discussion over their starters of crispy baked Onsen egg with golden oyster mushrooms with cauliflower purée remained quite professional, but once all of his concerns had been addressed, it turned more personal. Half way through the main course, she enquired after Draco, which provided him the opportunity to ask her about her family. Her father had passed away rather suddenly two years previously, and she had been doing her best to hold the company together since then. Unfortunately, she had not received much business training, and those she had relied upon for advice had been padding their own vaults, not looking out for the company. She had learned her lesson and that was why she had accepted the merger offer from Lucius.

"So, there is nothing other than work for you also, ja?" she asked as he was finishing his roasted rabbit with rosemary and garlic.

"No, not at the moment," he replied simply, knowing that he could say no more, but he found Hermione drifting into his thoughts as his rhubarb kuchen arrived.

"That is the hard thing about being like us, isn't it? You wonder if someone is sincere, ja?" she asked, sampling her rhubarb with confit of strawberries and yogurt.

He had the impression she was speaking from experience. "Indeed it is," he smiled sadly. That was precisely why he had not entered the dating scene.

She considered his words and took a sip of her Schnaps before saying, "I almost married once, but thank goodness I discovered it was my money he wanted and not me before it was too late."

"I find that hard to believe," Lucius replied as he could feel the warmth of the Schnaps coursing through his body and found it quite relaxing.

"I doubt that you do. I think that is why you are still alone." She eyed him knowingly before taking a sip of her drink and then refilling both glasses. "Do you think you will marry again?"

If he had been sober, he would have thought this question was very personal, but as he had enjoyed two very heavy beers with dinner and was now on his second glass of Schnaps, he answered without thinking. "Perhaps. If I find the right witch."

She smiled warmly at him. "Are you looking for the right witch?"

Without considering the ramifications of his words, he answered, "Discreetly."

"Perhaps you need not be so discreet. She might not realize she has caught your interest," Elsa said suggestively.

Lucius realized which direction this conversation was going and barely maintained his composure. "When the time is right, I will ensure that she knows." The merger was a critical juncture, and he did not want to do anything to drive a wedge in his business plans. "I find it best not to mix business and pleasure," he added before finishing off his drink. He hoped that was a non-committal enough statement to discourage her from further advances, yet not disappoint her too badly.

"That is very sound business advice," she replied, clearly trying to hide the disappointment in her voice.

"Dinner has been wonderful, and I believe we have covered all the questions I had," he said as he rose to his feet and walked to her side of the table. "I will be in touch over the next few weeks to finalize our merger. As it is getting late, I think I should return home." He took hold of her hand and kissed it softly. "Until next time," he said quietly before leaving.

As he left the restaurant and walked to clear his head before returning to England, he considered that perhaps he should not have left her with the impression that she might be the right witch. But then again, to do so might sour the deal, and he had already been imparting some advice which she could use to improve the company.

No, he was doing what had to be done to ensure a successful merger. It wasn't his fault if she took his behavior the wrong way.

Lucius spent the rest of the week focusing on finalizing the debts, liabilities, properties and rights pertinent in the merger with Elsa's company. This contract was especially difficult because it was international and not only did he have to follow the wizarding law of two different countries, but everything had to be translated into both languages. Owls were flying back and forth across the channel to ensure the wording in every document was correct. He would be glad when this was over.

On Friday he finally had time to attend to his personal correspondence. He had been sorting through it during the week, but none of it had been urgent, so he had kept putting it off, but some letters did require a reply.

He heard the clock on the mantle chime and he sighed. He had agreed to have dinner with Connor and Felicia. As he had not formally declared his interest in Hermione, Felicia had invited a fourth for dinner, Venus Gibbon, much to his annoyance. Lucius was acquainted with her from the various social events and charity functions he and Narcissa had attended, and of course had been well acquainted with her late husband, Brutus, but Lucius had never shown any interest in Venus. Not that it stopped women like her from showing interest in him. Brutus had been quite the figure and well connected, but his death left behind a list of debts and half-completed projects that fell through without his lead, leaving Venus with only a modicum of inheritance, and she was said to be 'ready to remarry'. He hadn't known that Felicia was familiar with the woman except in passing.

It was one dinner, and he was quite used to this by now. Once every month or two, Felicia planned these little dinner parties. It made her happy and Lucius did enjoy the Greengrass' company, so he indulged her.

The before dinner drinks were pleasant enough. He made polite conversation with Venus, enquiring about her children and sharing information about Draco's family while mostly conversing with Connor.

For dinner they were seated at a small table in the breakfast room. Felicia seemed to believe the more intimate setting might encourage Lucius to consider his dinner companion as something more. He shared one side of table with Venus while Connor and Felicia were seated on the other. While Venus might have once shared the beauty of her namesake, the years had not been kind to her, and he found her manner of dropping names irritating. He did his best to make polite conversation during the first course, but it was mostly one-sided in Venus' favor and he was quickly losing interest.

By the second course of dinner, of roast lamb and sauté chicken lyonnaise with vegetable marrow farcis and chateau potatoes, a favorite of Connor's and one that the Greengrass' house-elves prepared superbly, he did his best not to encourage Venus, instead spending a lot of time talking to Connor about various Ministry policies. He could tell this frustrated Felicia, who would once again tell him that he would never find anyone if he did not at least talk to witches. She had no way of knowing, but he had already found the witch he wanted.

As Lucius had eaten as much as he'd intended of his Waldorf pudding and French crème éclairs with peaches in chartreuse jelly, he turned to Connor and asked, "You wouldn't happen to have any of those cigars left, would you?" He knew that Felicia did not approve of smoking and that they would have to do so outside. It was the most polite way he could devise to get out of further conversation with Venus.

"In fact, I do. And I have just acquired a wonderful new cognac you might enjoy." He rose to his feet. "Ladies, if you will excuse us."

Lucius also stood and then held Felicia's hand gently in his. "Felicia, dinner was wonderful as always. You've once again outdone yourself," he said and kissed her fingers lightly. He turned to Venus. "A pleasure having dinner with you," he said as he nodded his head slightly. Mrs. Gibbon raised her hand as if expecting the same courtesy, her expression one of womanly politeness but her eyes glinted for a fraction of a second, the only outward display that this evening had not gone as he'd hoped. Lucius merely cupped her fingertips on his open hand, nodded again and let go as he moved from the table. "Ladies, enjoy your after dinner coffee," he intoned. He turned and followed Connor from the room, eager to be out in the crisp night air and away from the piercing gaze of Mrs. Gibbon.

Once they were seated in the garden, Connor asked probingly, "So, Venus could not compare to your mystery witch?"

"I know that Felicia finds dinner for three awkward, but I think it would be less awkward than to be the widow of the month for an uninterested dinner partner," Lucius replied dryly as he snipped the end of his cigar before lighting it. "Or to be the widower of the month or counted as one of the most eligible in *Witch Weekly's* bachelor of the month list." He hadn't meant to sound bitter, and he gave his friend a sympathetic smile hoping he'd excuse his behavior.

He wasn't at all disappointed; Connor could be quite perceptive. "So, it's not going well with your witch?"

Lucius took a puff of his cigar and watched the smoke float away in the moonlight. "Our relationship will unfortunately be progressing slowly."

"Anything you want to talk about?" Connor prompted.

That is exactly what Lucius wanted. "Can I have your strictest confidence on this? I don't even want you mentioning it to Felicia."

"I think you know you can trust me. I've not told her that you are interested in someone," replied Connor seriously.

And yet she still felt it necessary to try pairing me up with society's most eligible and marriage minded socialites she thought scornfully. Lucius looked over his shoulder to make sure no one else was around. "Let me start at the beginning. I literally ran into her in the library or perhaps she ran into me, it doesn't really matter. We only had a couple of minutes of conversation, most of it apologizing, but I felt something. It was unexpected, and at first a little disconcerting, but she intrigues me like none other has in a long while."

"Do you believe in fate?" Lucius asked, interrupting his own tale and looking Connor in the eyes.

Connor considered the question a moment. "Not particularly, of course I've not really encountered anything that would make me believe one way or the other."

"I hadn't believed in it either, but over the course of the next couple of weeks, we encountered each other a few more times. This is someone who I had not seen in five years and suddenly she seemed to be wherever I go." After a moment of consideration he added, "She was the one at the resort."

"So you spent a week with this witch you think you might be fated to be with and nothing happened?" Connor asked in disbelief.

"It's complicated and I'll get to that." He took a sip of his cognac. "I wouldn't say 'nothing happened'. There was some flirting and a deep emotional connection made." Lucius thought back wistfully to their time at the resort and how he had fought the temptation to do more with Hermione.

"Lucius, I know it's been a long time. Are you nervous about having another partner?" Connor asked gently.

Lucius chuckled. He was not in the least bit concerned about his sexual performance. "No, nothing like that. I do have your word that you will tell no one, correct?" he asked seriously.

"On my mother's grave, I will tell no one," Connor replied solemnly.

He steeled himself for Connor's reaction. "The reason nothing has happened is that she is married."

"Merlin, Lucius! You could have any witch you want, but to go for a married woman!" Connor said in utter shock.

"I didn't plan this. I never intended to develop feelings for her it just... happened. And before you accuse me of anything, I would not call her marriage happy," Lucius replied defensively.

"So what are you doing now?" Connor asked cautiously, concerned his friend was playing with fire.

"Very little. Over vacation I gave her a taste of what life with me would be like, but I kept it platonic. Not even so much as a goodnight kiss, though Merlin knows it required all the restraint I possess." He paused and savored his cigar. "There is little more that I can do other than conveniently run into her now and again, which I have, innocently of course, and nothing untoward."

"And you think she has feelings for you?" Connor probed, clearly wondering if this was something Lucius was perceiving.

Lucius was about to answer when he heard the door open behind him. Both men looked over their shoulders' to see a rather irate Felicia approaching him.

"Lucius Malfoy, I hardly know why I go through all this effort for you if you are going to be so rude," she said angrily.

"I was hardly rude. It's merely that I had very little in common with Mrs. Gibbon." He took a draw on his cigar and leaned his head back to blow the smoke straight up in the air.

"Felicia, dear, I know you mean well, but Lucius will find someone in his own time," Connor offered, trying to deflect his wife's ire from his friend.

She crossed her arms. "Oh, he will, will he? It's been three years, and he still does not attend social functions. How exactly is he supposed to find someone if he sequesters himself in that manor of his?"

"I'm right here," Lucius offered since they were talking about him as though he was not there. "And I do get out."

She finally turned her attention back to him. "Oh, yes, your Tuesday dinners at your club where you make no effort to socialize. Or perhaps a business trip..." Her voice trailed off before her face lit up hopefully. "Oh, Elsa Schwartz! Of course, I should have realized it earlier. Had you said something..."

Lucius tried not to choke on his cigar as she jumped to the wrong conclusion, and he took a sip of cognac as he quickly tried to decide whether he should correct her or not. "I have always liked to keep my private life private."

Felicia turned her attention to Connor. "And how could you not tell me?" she asked with hands on hips.

"I'm sorry. Lucius swore me to secrecy," Connor replied, playing along with Lucius' deception.

She momentarily glared at Lucius before moving to give Connor a quick kiss. "If you had told me, I would not have invited Venus tonight and gotten her hopes up."

"My apologies to you and Mrs. Gibbon for that," Lucius said penitently. "There is nothing official at the moment, perhaps just hopeful wishing," he added wistfully, referring to Hermione and not Elsa, though Felicia would not know that.

She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Then I shall wish you the best of luck and look forward to a day when you bring your own dinner companion." She smiled warmly before leaving the two of them in the garden.

After a few moments, Connor said, "Well, that's a pretty pickle you've left her with."

Lucius waved off Connor's concern. "I left her with a romantic dream. And if everything works out as I have planned, I doubt she will concern herself with who I have chosen and just be happy that I have finally chosen someone."

Connor leaned over the arm of his chair, wanting an answer to his previously asked question. "Now, we were talking about you *married* witch. You think she has feelings for you?"

"Those are the signals she has given me, and my instincts tell me I'm right about her. Everything depends on her actions. If her marriage truly is over and I have the feeling it's spiraling, falling apart... But she will need to be the one to end it." He was almost positive she felt the same way he did. She had positively thrived in his presence, and her reaction the two times he had seen her at work reinforced his belief.

"Even if she divorces... Well, your sister..." Connor said, unsure of what exactly he wanted to say.

Lucius knew that Connor was alluding to the events that had led Delilah to flee the country. But circumstances were different where he and Hermione were concerned. Whereas no one had shown Delilah any support and the media attention, the accusations and Ministry investigations had been unbearable because of her name, he would ensure that didn't happen to Hermione if he could help it. After all, he did still command a certain level of clout and power. That and he intended to be there for Hermione if she chose to divorce, to be her rock and confidant should she need him. "I do realize that. I will continue to nurture our friendship and hope that she will confide in me if she makes that decision. I can help guide her through the process in a manner that should keep her reputation intact. After that... Well, I would then be free to bestow her with my affections."

"That's a dicey proposition of you offering her advice and then swooping in," Connor offered.

Lucius finished off the cognac and poured a second glass. He knew precisely what Connor was thinking as he had had that same thought. "It will all be on her terms. I plan to be careful about not offering judgment or pushing her one way or the other. In other words, I will be the perfect friend, and yet I don't plan on completely hiding my attraction. I was in Slytherin; I did learn the art of subtleties."

"But you are going to let her know how much better it could be for her to dump the other guy and choose you." Connor did not completely keep the disapproval out of his voice.

He had known this would be a very touchy subject. There had always been a chance that Connor would assume Lucius was trying to ruin her marriage. Without going into specifics, there was little he could do to assure Connor that the marriage was already failing by the time Lucius had met Hermione. "To put it bluntly, yes. She married beneath her. He is not worthy of someone like her. I can only presume that it was one of those highly emotional, post-war weddings, or one that everyone around her expected," he said defensively. While he could not tell Connor the details, he knew that Hermione and Weasley had been close at school and had worked with Potter extensively to bring down the Dark Lord. And of course there had been the articles exalting the marriage of two school sweethearts and war heroes. From reading post-war articles it seemed there was a definite pressure for the two of them to wed.

"That is quite the conundrum," Connor finally said. The two men smoked in silence for several long minutes before Connor asked, "Any kids?"

Lucius considered whether answering this question might give away her identity. Finally he replied, "No, thankfully. I know that will make the divorce, should it happen, easier to obtain."

"And you're set on this witch?" Connor probed.

"I am. I've waited three years to meet her." He stared off into the night, watching the smoke from the cigar illuminated by the moonlight. He knew there was no one else.

"And what if her marriage isn't falling apart?" Connor asked pointedly. "Will you push your case?"

Lucius sighed. "You know I can't. It would draw too much attention." He wouldn't push, but he wouldn't let it drop. By treating her like a princess, he would convince her of where her place really was. He was Lucius Malfoy and he did not lose and definitely not to a Weasley.

A/N: As always, my undying gratitude to my beta, beawesley2, who is always there to nudge me in the right direction when I forget that the story must exist not only in my mind, but in the written world as well. And for those who were pining to hear from Lucius, I hope this helps. :) The current plan is to flip flop points of view in successive chapters.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 29

Ron and Hermione are on vacation, but can Ron manage not to put his foot in it again? Hermione begins to think seriously about her current relationship with Ron.

The first half of the weekend went quite well. Hermione and Ron spent time out hiking through the countryside and just enjoying the atmosphere. It was very relaxing, especially when their hike got stopped by the sheep moving pastures. Neither one of them complained about having to wait for a very large flock to cross the road. Instead they spent the time making up personalities and stories for the various sheep.

It was silly, but it was very entertaining, and it was exactly what they needed. Ron had suggested they color the sheep, but Hermione had protested that it would draw too much attention to them as she was pretty sure the shepherd was Muggle. But a part of her thought that it would be a very fun idea.

Every meal they requested through the magical blackboard was excellent and hearty, and it was nice to have a home cooked meal without actually having to cook it. They spent the evenings lazing in front of the fire to ward off the late summer chill, occasionally playing one of the board games from the cupboard. There wasn't much conversation, but Hermione did not mind. Moments like this reminded her of what a wonderful person Ron could be.

The next morning when she exited their bedroom, breakfast of sausage and eggs was already waiting for them. Hermione made one last longing look around the adorable cottage, she knew they needed leave early in the afternoon, but they could at least enjoy the morning. Ron came out a moment later, scratching his head, ruffling his hair and stretching. "So, what do you want to do today?" she asked as she poured tea.

"There's an old castle nearby, and I thought you might like to explore that," Ron offered, dropping his arm.

"That would be wonderful." It sounded like the perfect activity. She had always enjoyed visiting ruins as a child traveling with her parents.

After they had eaten and gotten dressed, Ron Apparated them near the castle. It was a short fifteen minute walk from where they arrived to the abandoned castle. At least Hermione presumed there was an abandoned castle. She could see nothing, but she assumed it was charmed similar to Hogwarts to keep the Muggles away.

As they walked up the hill to the castle, Ron confirmed her thought by saying, "This was a wizarding castle, so the Muggles don't know it's here. I've never been here, but Charlie told me about it."

She kept looking from the path up to the castle and it slowly came into focus. While it was not completely intact, it was also not completely ruined. "Did he say what sort of state it was in?" she asked curiously.

"I didn't get to ask a lot of questions, but he did mention that there are a lot of artifacts, that a lot of the original furnishings are still here. Apparently the witch who lived here last was a bit paranoid and charmed the place so that people wouldn't steal her belongings."

"A bit like Mrs. Black?" she asked jovially.

"Probably a lot like that, though hopefully without the portrait," he replied with a chuckle. They had reached the top of the hill and were standing before the entrance to the castle. One of the two doors was broken off one of its hinges and hanging at an angle, leaving a gap large enough to slip through. "Ready?" he asked as he pulled his wand out.

She took hold of her wand and replied, "Ready." She felt a little nervous about entering the shadowy wizarding castle, but if Charlie had been here, she reasoned there was nothing to fear.

Once inside the darkness of the castle, they both lit their wands. While furniture was broken and dust and cobwebs covered everything, it was amazingly intact. As they explored deeper into the castle, she was amazed that there hadn't been any effort to preserve the castle or turn it into a museum like the Muggles did.

Of course, now that she thought about it, she couldn't think of any wizarding castles that were tourist attractions. Then again, that might have something to do with the fact that many were still inhabited.

"This is really amazing," she said as they entered the main dining hall. The table was still set and there were candles in all the holders. To add warmth to the room, there were tapestries on all the walls interspersed with mirrors. The colors were faded, but the people and animals were still animated. She lost track of time as she tried to decipher the stories that the tapestries were telling. After a while, Ron prodded her to keep going through the castle.

She was disappointed about having to leave before she had finished analyzing the tapestries, but she realized that Ron had to be getting bored standing in the dining hall waiting for her to finish.

When they arrived in the library, she gasped audibly. While it wasn't a large room, every wall was covered with books. Immediately she started reading the titles. Naturally they were what would be considered rare books since they were so old. She started to reach out for one of the books that she had only heard mentioned in other books, but stopped before she touched it. She remembered what Ron had said about the castle being charmed so that no one would steal its contents.

"Ron, do you think it would be okay for me to look at one of the books?" she asked curiously.

He shrugged. "Dunno. I have no idea what kind of charm has been put on everything. You could try it and see."

She thought about it and then thought better of it. It could have been a harmless type of sticking charm that wouldn't let her move one of the books or it could have been something with much nastier consequences. She thought back to their days in Dumbledore's Army and how she had charmed the contract so that Marietta Edgecombe had been permanently labeled 'SNEAK' and decided not to risk it. She could always return when she was better prepared to decipher the nature of the charms before looking at the books. It wasn't like they were going anywhere.

"I think I'll wait." She then continued to peruse the books, mindful of how long she was taking. She saw at least a dozen books that she would love to read. She would definitely have to look into whether or not it would be possible to read the books. It would be a shame if they were forever locked in the castle, never to be read again, left to crumble to dust.

Realizing it was getting close to lunch, they did not linger very long in any of the other rooms. "Thanks for suggesting this, Ron," she said as they left the castle. She was pleased that he had finally found an activity they both enjoyed.

"It was pretty wicked, wasn't it?" replied Ron, and he led her back down the trail.

They could have easily Disapparated from there back to the cottage, but it was a beautiful day, and she did not mind walking for a while.

There was a long silence as they walked down the hill. Hermione started to grow uncomfortable with it since she got the impression that Ron wanted to say something.

Finally he spoke. "Hermione, I know you like your job..."

"Ron, please don't ruin the weekend," she pleaded, knowing what he was going to say and hoping to waylay him. They had been having such a wonderful time; she didn't want the moment spoiled.

He sighed heavily. "I just want an answer. I keep thinking that you're just putting me off that you'll keep putting this off and then it will be too late. A family is very important to me."

She sighed. "I know that. And I'm not going to keep putting it off." She had known this had been too good to be true.

He stopped and sat on one of the large rocks on the hillside, gently holding her hands. "Then we need to talk about this, really talk about this. I need you to tell me when you think you might be ready next year, the year after, three years from now, when?" he looked imploringly into her eyes.

"I don't know," she said pulling her hand from his. This was something she hated putting a definitive time frame on. "By the time I'm thirty," she finally replied with a shrug. That gave him a definite answer of sorts and gave her some maneuvering room at least she hoped it did.

"You're sure?" Ron asked cautiously, clearly not believing her. "Thirty?"

She was as sure as she was ever going to be. "I am. I just need you to be patient."

He didn't hide the pain in his voice. "I'll try, but it's hard to watch everyone else having children, having a family, having what I want for us."

She placed her hand on his thigh. "I know that, but I'm just not ready."

"You keep saying that, and I keep wondering if you will ever be ready," he replied seriously.

"My parents were in their thirties when I was born. There's nothing wrong with waiting a little while before having a child," she said to defend her viewpoint.

"It's already been five years, and now you are asking for even more than that. I just always thought that our kids would grow up with Harry and Ginny's, maybe even going to Hogwarts together," he replied sadly, throwing one of the pebbles that had been on the boulder down the hill.

Hermione had once thought the same thing, but she hadn't expected them to start a family so soon. She really didn't know what to say, so she said nothing.

Ron asked softly, "Can you think about this? I'm not saying we have to start a family now, but I'd prefer to have kids sooner rather than later."

She stared down at her hands in her lap. She was incredibly tired of having this conversation. She thought she had given Ron a good answer, but it seemed like the only answer he wanted was that she would agree to have a family in the immediate future something she still wasn't sure about.

He took hold of her hand. "Hermione, the wizarding world isn't like the Muggle world. I thought you would have realized that by now. Married witches..." he paused, searching for the right words. "Married witches just don't work."

"That's just so 1950s and needs to be changed," she pulled her hand away and balled her fist as she tried to control her anger before rising to her feet and pacing. "Women can contribute a lot. I do have a brain, Ron, and so do the other witches I know." Why could he not see how much she could contribute? Then she started thinking about some of her magical classmates and Lavender Brown immediately came to mind. Hermione realized that most of the girls in her classes had not really put forth a lot of effort into academics and that no witches born to magical families had been in her Arithmancy or Ancient Runes classes, that she had been one of three girls in NEWT Potions and all had been Muggle-born.

She had known that the wizarding world was old fashioned, but she had never really paid attention to exactly how old fashioned. After all, about half of their professors at Hogwarts had been witches, but then none of them seemed to have families at least not that anyone was aware of. And almost all of her coworkers were male or older witches with a few younger witches in clerical jobs, but most of them were under twenty, and she could not think of one who was older than twenty-five. She was the only young witch potions brewer.

Her blood was really starting to boil. She had thought that being a witch would open a wonderful world of possibilities to her, but instead she was being told that she should shut up, stay home and have babies by everyone. Well, everyone other than Lucius who had recruited her for her mind and placed her on the most difficult and important project his company was working on.

"I know you have a brain..." he started.

"Just because every witch you know is happy being a baby factory, doesn't mean that is for me," she said loudly, cutting him off, knowing he was just going to say the same things he always did.

"I never said don't expect you to be a baby factory," he said defensively.

"Ron, I just want to wait until I have a child," she started to say, but he corrected her, "Children. I want a family."

"Ron, a child is a family," she pointed out.

"You keep saying child only one. Why? You know I want a big family four tops," he said, his tone becoming the one he used that felt like he was interrogating her.

"And I don't want to spend my life focused on four snot-nosed kids. I put a lot of hard work into my education, and I intend to use it," she poked him in the chest to emphasize what she was saying.

"Snot-nosed you think my kids will be *snot-nosed*..." he started to spout.

"I'm an only child I never considered having more than one child, maybe two at the most," she stated firmly. "I grew up with a working mother, and I turned out just fine. And like my mother, I intend to work and help support my family." Unlike your mother, she stopped herself in time from saying the last part, but the memory of Mrs. Weasley exalting about her new oven range on their last visit struck her. "I'm not some 1950's housewife who'll be excited by the new gas range or modern magical cooking appliance! And I intend to make a serious contribution to the world not fill a house to the rafters with redheads."

With that she popped back to the cottage and put an anti-Apparition charm around it until she could leave. Right now she needed to get away from Ron before she did something she would regret. He was so pigheaded and stubborn and did not seem to really care about her feelings.

She stuffed her belongings in the suitcase and left Ron's strewn around the bedroom, not caring how he got them home. She couldn't go home because she knew that was the first place Ron would look for her. Nor could she go to her parents' house, not that they would understand what had her so upset anyway. Sadly she could not be around her wizarding family. While George and Angelina were likely to be sympathetic, she knew that would be a logical place for her to be and made it someplace Ron was likely to check. Checking her pockets, she saw she only had about five Pounds of Muggle money - not enough to get a place to stay. She decided to head to Edinburgh and hope that Ron wouldn't think to look for her there. The wizarding community there wasn't as vibrant as the one in London, but there was a decent inn, The Green Dragon.

She was so incensed that his romantic weekend away had been nothing more than a ploy to butter her up to agreeing to have a family. She should have known that his behavior had been too good to be true. He wasn't doing it because he loved her and wanted their marriage to get better, but so she'd stay home and raise his children.

Once she had calmed down a little, she transfigured her robes into a suitable Muggle dress and headed out into Muggle Edinburgh for a while. It was a Sunday so most shops were closed, but she wasn't interested in shopping. She just wanted to walk around and try to make sense of her emotions.

Eventually, she found herself sitting on a bench on the Royal Terrace Gardens, staring across the city at the castle, absentmindedly watching the people around her. Seeing them with their cell phones and iPods, she was reminded about how much the Muggle world had changed since she started Hogwarts, and how she didn't quite fit in there either. Oh, she knew what the various devices were, but she found that she didn't miss them. She really liked the wizarding world, but just not the attitude towards young witches. Ron was right, once a witch was older and her kids were in school, she was generally welcomed warmly into the workforce. Younger witches... well, she definitely got the impression that everyone expected you to be tending to home and hearth for her next eighteen no, next twenty to thirty years of her life!

Well, the wizarding world would just have to accept that Hermione Granger Weasley was not going to happily or quietly fit into their molds. She realized that starting an equality revolution was probably not something that she could feasibly do at least not without finding more supporters. Besides, by focusing on that campaign, she would be jeopardizing the job she was trying to prove that she deserved to have.

It was all much more difficult than it should have been. For now she would just settle for setting an example for other young witches that even females could go forth and be a successful and contributing member of society. Perhaps she could even introduce the idea of day care, though unlike the Muggle world, there were no wizarding primary schools. Parents either hired a tutor or mothers taught their progeny. That mindset was part of what hampered witches from having careers. Though presumably, those

who could hire tutors would be free to work, but generally if a family could afford a tutor, there was no reason for the wife to work. It really was a self-defeating cycle now that she thought about it.

Of course, this model had the advantage that it encouraged families, and the wizarding world was not afflicted with the degradation of family values that was evident in the Muggle world, so it wasn't entirely bad she just thought that it was horribly outdated.

When her stomach rumbled, she thought about getting something to eat and decided to return to the inn because five Pounds couldn't buy a decent meal.

She slipped in barely noticed and sat in a booth where she could see the main room but be relatively unnoticed. She ate quickly, borrowed a few books off the shelf and retreated to her room before Ron could find her. Of course, that presumed that he was actually looking for her, but given the fact that it was Ron, he might have decided to just let her return of her own accord.

Hermione tried to read one of the books, but her mind just kept drifting to how miserable life with Ron could be. Sure, they had their good times, but it always came back to him wanting her to quit working and start a family. Always. This was an impasse in their relationship. A very big one. She knew that given the fact he came from a large family, it stood to reason that he would want the same, but it was something that had not really dawned on her before they married, or even during the first year of marriage.

"Stupid Ron unwilling to bend," she muttered to herself as she finally gave up on reading the book. "Stupid Ron won't respect my wishes. Stupid Ron always questioning me about my job. Stupid Ron never trusting me as if accusing me that I'm too naïve to know if Malfoy Industries is carrying out Dark Arts and practices," she said as she started beating her pillow into submission. It was strangely therapeutic to punch the pillow as she thought of all the ways Ron annoyed her.

A bit disturbing as well. There *were* quite a few.

She sighed and finally settled onto her back. With neither of them willing to budge, she did not see how they could continue like this. Not that she hadn't tried to, but she had spent the first five years of her marriage retreating to the library in the evenings or working late into the evening, and that was no way to behave in married life. She started to doubt they could make their marriage work, and it made her feel horrible. They were fighting over something they should have considered before they said 'I do'. Now it was her turn to feel a bit stupid.

She had a very hard time falling asleep and even when she did, she slept fitfully.

Hermione looked through her clothes and picked what she thought was most appropriate for work. She then packed everything else up and decided to take it with her. She still wasn't sure if she would be going home. She really needed to, at least to get more clothes. Whether she stayed or not would depend on Ron.

She tried her best to keep focused on work, drinking copious amounts of coffee in an attempt to stay alert.

"Rough weekend?" Harold asked as she started on her third cup of coffee.

She blushed at being that obvious that she hadn't slept well. "You could say that, but I think we all have those from time to time," she replied casually, not wanting to mix her private and work lives.

"That we do," he commiserated and then glanced over her work, evaluating whether she was overloaded. "Everything okay?" he asked.

She gave him a reassuring smile. "Yeah, I'll be all right."

He gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Take a break when you need one."

"Thanks," she replied. She knew that he was looking out for the rest of the team as much as he was looking out for her. After all, any mistake she made could set their work back quite a bit.

She did take a few extra breaks during the day, heading outside to walk around the building and get some fresh air. Those breaks helped, but they also gave her time to think. She wondered why Ron had not bothered to even send her a message. It just started to reinforce to her that he thought about her the way most of the others born into the wizarding world started to think about witches being good for nothing more than raising children.

As she walked around the building, a part of her began to wish that she had discovered this five years ago. She had been so naïve about the wizarding world, having only really experienced that isolated environs of Hogwarts. There had been signs, but she had been blind to them as she had focused only her education. The signs had been more obvious in the Ministry, but she'd ignored the occasional odd look and muttered whisper from the older women and focused on her career. She had never considered how it would affect her life and her relationship with Ron. She had her plan for her life and he had his for her life, and they had never really discussed how compatible those two plans were. She wanted to put the blame solely on him, rationalizing that he should have seen how ambitious she was, but she knew that if she had only opened her eyes to the ways of the wizarding world, she should have mentioned it to him. The fault lay with them both.

She returned to the building and saw the rest of her team started to clean up for the day. She walked over to Harold. "I think I'm going to stay a little later to make up for the extra breaks."

He smiled weakly at her, understanding what she did not say. "Sure. Just don't stay too late."

She did not really have any work to do, but she did not want to return home at least not right now. If she had received some sort of message from Ron, she might have felt differently, but he still hadn't tried to reach her.

She was trying to concentrate on the notes from their last attempt on the Dragon Pox cure when she heard Lucius' voice ask, "Working late again?" from behind her.

His voice had carried well across her small workroom, making her jump and placed her hand over her heart. "Don't do that! You scared me out of my skin."

He grinned playfully and leaned against the door frame. "My apologies. Perhaps you should work facing the door in the future to prevent me from sneaking up on you if you are going to make a habit of working late."

"I'm not planning on making a habit of it," she replied quietly.

"That's good to hear." He quickly looked over her work as he moved towards her work area. "This doesn't seem that urgent."

"It isn't," she reluctantly admitted and tossed her quill on the table.

He sat next to her. "Then is there a reason you are working on it now?" he asked gently.

She absentmindedly stacked her notes up. "Not really." While she longed to talk to someone about her conflicted emotions, she was almost positive that Lucius was not the right person.

"Ah, tension at home," he replied knowingly. "It won't get better if you're here."

She arched an eyebrow at his reply, surprised that he would be suggesting she try to work things out with Ron since she had the impression he had feelings for her. "True, but I've been giving him chance after chance to work things out, and he doesn't seem to be making an effort. For example, we got in a row yesterday, and he hasn't sent

me any sort of message or tried to contact me at all. Now I ask you, what sort of signal does that send?" she asked, then snapped her mouth shut. Her mouth had outpaced her brain. While she had not given him full details, she had said more than she would have preferred.

He furrowed his brows. "I see your point. Surely you aren't planning on spending all night here."

"No. I'm not sure what I'm going to do, but staying here isn't any good, is it?" she asked hopelessly. For once she did not know how to solve a problem facing her.

"Not in the least," he replied with a jaunty grin. "I'll leave you to clean up your work." He rose and headed towards the door.

She really did not want him to leave because she did not really want to be alone. "Lucius," she said before stopping to really think what she wanted to say to him.

He turned to face her. "Yes, Hermione?" he asked gently.

It took her a moment to compose a response. "Thank you. I think I really needed someone to talk to."

He smiled warmly and replied, "That's what friends are for. Which I must say I'm surprised you did not turn to one of the Potters."

She looked away and started restacking her papers, not wanting to meet his eyes. "It's not really something they would understand," she said in little more than a whisper.

He silently crossed the distance to her and put his hand on her shoulder. "But you do want to talk more about it, don't you?" he prodded gently.

She could not believe that he was offering to listen to her problems. "I do, but... what would people think?"

"I know the perfect place where people won't ask questions." He pulled out his wand and flicked it, organizing her workspace. "Come with me," he said as he offered her his hand.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 29

Lucius can hardly believe what he hears when Hermione bares her soul to him.

Hermione tentatively took Lucius' hand, and without warning he Apparated them to a sumptuous lobby. When they arrived, he steadied her with his other arm as she recovered from the surprise of an unplanned Apparition. He should have warned her, but it would have ruined the surprise.

"Where are we?" she asked once she recovered her bearings.

"My private club. I sometimes bring clients here because of its confidentiality. The members are very mindful of each other's privacy, and no one will gossip about the two of us being here. I assumed you didn't want anyone to see the two of us talking," he replied simply. He hoped this would put her at ease. It was public, yet private at the same time.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked uncomfortably.

He patted her hand reassuringly before releasing it. It was quite charming how she was suddenly so concerned about appearances though in this case he was not sure if it was because she was his employee or that he was a very eligible bachelor. "Quite sure. Come." He placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her to a table where he ordered a bottle of one of the wines they'd shared on vacation, one she had particularly enjoyed. "Now, what's on your mind?"

"Well, right now it's why are you being so kind to me? After all, I'm just a low-level employee," she asked cautiously.

He casually took a sip of his wine. It appeared to be the former that was bothering her. "You are more than 'just a low-level employee'. I have come to consider you a friend, and you are in need. Since you are uncomfortable discussing your dilemma with your other friends, I had hoped you might feel comfortable confiding in me." He knew that little good could come from keeping negative emotions bottled inside. Besides, if she voiced her misgivings out loud, it might assist her in coming to the logical conclusion.

After she took a long drink of her wine, she leaned forward against the table. "Well, you correctly assumed that it has something to do with Ron." She paused, collecting her thoughts. "And I suppose it has something to do with me. I don't know that I realized how truly different the Muggle and wizarding worlds are socially. It's not something that Hogwarts prepared me for," she replied, sounding almost guilty.

He said nothing, nodding slowly to let her know that he was willing to listen. Now that she was speaking, he wanted her to finish so that he could offer the best advice possible.

"The short story is that I think I have a lot to offer the wizarding world, and I don't want to put everything I learned and everything I have to offer to waste. The whole time I was at Hogwarts, I was praised for my intellect, but since the War... Well no one seems to really care about that. I get strange looks because I want to work instead of stay home and start a family."

"Ah, yes, the wizarding dilemma. You do know that I value your intellect?" he said reassuringly. He could understand one of her intellect and talent feeling trapped by the male-centric behaviors of the wizarding world.

"I do," she said quickly before adding, "I mean I presume that's why you hired me in the first place. But you are one of the few. I want to be more than a baby receptacle, and the stress of that is just getting to me. At first it was just Molly since her other children are giving her grandchildren. But lately the pressure has gotten worse, and Ron has become utterly relentless and the more time I spend with his family, the more I start to feel like I'm abnormal." She sighed, as though a great weight had been lifted.

He reached across and put his hand on hers, giving it a firm squeeze of reassurance. "I assure you that you are not abnormal. You are a young, ambitious witch, and no one should fault you for having goals that do not involve immediately having children."

Hermione smiled wanly. "I try not to, but when everyone around you treats you like that, it's hard not to start to believe it. Ron hates that I'm working." She paused as if there was more to that statement than she wanted to admit aloud.

Lucius thought he could guess, considering they were speaking of the Weasleys. "And your husband is not particularly keen on your working for me?"

She lowered her eyes. "Yes, well, there is that." He finally released her hand, and she took a long sip of her wine. When she set it down, he refilled her glass.

"And I presume that is why you are avoiding your husband?" he prompted. He could hardly believe what he was hearing. He knew there was trouble, but he had not thought it this serious.

"It is. I thought we were reaching an understanding that I wanted to wait a few more years before having kids, but well... We had a big row while on holiday, and I just couldn't take it anymore." After several long seconds of silence she leaned forward and, despite his assurances that their conversation was private, asked quietly, "Is there such a thing as divorce in the wizarding world?"

His wine glass froze on the way to his mouth, and he was thankful that he had not been drinking or he might have choked. Once he regained control, he set it down. Realizing the sensitive nature of her question, he replied quietly, "It is rare, but not unheard of. Is this something you are seriously considering?" He hoped he did not sound too eager.

She looked down at her hands as she twisted her napkin. "I don't know. I just know that neither of us is happy, and the one thing that would make him happy, I'm not ready to give him right now because I don't know that it would make me happy."

"I see," he replied, contemplating her words. This is what he had secretly longed to hear, but he knew that if he seemed to be pushing her too hard, that she would grow suspicious and he might lose her.

"Is there any sort of stigma associate with it? I mean I know how the wizarding world feels about unwed mothers and such. And the fact that I can't say I've heard of anyone doing it..." her voice trailed off as she watched him expectantly.

"There can be. It depends on the circumstances. As I said, it is quite uncommon and not generally brought up in polite conversation. Though there was a high-profile divorce before you went to Hogwarts. It was all anybody was talking about, and I daresay that yours would be equally as high profile since you are both heroes of the war," he cautioned.

She slumped back in her chair and took a big gulp of her wine. "That's what I was afraid of. And because of why I would want the divorce... Well, it's not going to look good, is it?"

"It can be made to look bad," he admitted. "Though handled properly, it can be done without ruining your reputation." He knew just the man to handle this situation properly. If only he could convince her it was the right thing to do.

"What about his? Just because I don't think we should be married doesn't mean that I wish any ill will on him." She looked miserable.

"Or his. But that would depend on his behavior. I can suggest a solicitor if you wish to learn more," he offered. He was surprised that she would be so concerned about Weasley's feelings after he had shown such callous disregard for hers, but he also knew the two of them had been friends for many years, and it was hard to throw away a friendship.

"So you think I should give up on my marriage?" she asked, a little startled.

He had not thought his words would cause her to jump to that conclusion, though it was what he truly thought. He shook his head. "It's not my place to make that decision. I know that you like to make informed decisions, and speaking with an expert in wizarding law would be more beneficial to you than trying to wade through it yourself. Besides, it might draw the wrong sort of attention if someone saw you spending days researching wizarding law," he pointed out.

She had to admit that he had a point. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to learn more." She swirled her wine as she considered everything she had just said and heard. "But what do you honestly think? And don't sugar-coat it."

He once again reached out to touch her hand. "I see an unhappy young woman seated across from me. I think that you need to try to solve that unhappiness before it destroys you. Whether that is finding a way to work things out with your husband or starting your life over is up to you. That sort of decision can only be made by the person who will be affected the most," he said wisely.

After hearing his non-answer, she sighed. "I know that, and I think that's what makes it so hard."

"Ending a serious relationship should never be easy." Yes, he seemed to be steering her in the right direction without her realizing it. *Be supportive, non-judgmental*, he mentally urged himself.

She sighed morosely. "Thank you for listening, and now I think you know why I couldn't bring this up with Harry or Ginny."

"Indeed. I doubt that is the sort of secret either of them would have been able to keep, though I imagine Potter would know as little about the subject as you." He swallowed the last of his wine. "I'll have the information delivered to you at work tomorrow." He wanted her to act quickly before doubt began to set in and she reconsidered her actions and chose a path that would not make her happy.

She smiled warmly. "Thank you. I feel much better already, so thank you again. You can't know how much this has meant to me." She set her glass down, ready to leave and start thinking about what was to come next.

"You are quite welcome. If you need a sympathetic ear, please do not hesitate to let me know." He needed to nurture the trust she had in him, spend time around her and continue to show her that what she had with Weasley was not what she deserved.

She returned his genial grin. "I will. Now, I think I should go." She rose to her feet and was surprised when he did the same. His manners were always so refined and even in this simple conversation, he had made her feel like the most important person in the world.

"Of course. Allow me to see you out. Once you are in the lobby, you will be able to Disapparate." Once again he placed his hand on the small of her back. When they reached the lobby, he said, "Good night, Hermione," and gave the back of her hand a kiss before returning to the club interior.

He chuckled victoriously as he returned to his table. Everything was working out perfectly. He had correctly deduced the source of her unhappiness, and he was most definitely in a position to help her overcome that obstacle.

He called one of the house-elves over, ordered dinner, and penned a message. He was reasonably sure that by the time he had finished his dinner, he could begin setting his plans in motion.

Lucius was enjoying an after dinner brandy when a short, stocky, conservatively dressed wizard in glasses joined him at the table.

"A little late in the evening to be seeking legal counsel, isn't it, Mr. Malfoy?" he asked.

"Ah, Reg, wonderful to see you," Lucius replied jovially. "As much as I would love for this to be a social call, I do have a bit of a legal dilemma that only you can handle properly."

Reg looked very curious. "And what might that be?"

"I have a dear friend who is in an unhappy marriage." He knew there was no reason to mince words and it was better to get to the point. "She is interested in learning about

her options and getting your opinion well the opinion of an expert on divorce."

Reg's eyes widened momentarily. "I see."

Lucius knew that Reg would never ask for details. "I'll send her to you tomorrow at noon, if that's all right with you." He knew what Reg's answer would be.

"Of course. I shall make sure I clear my schedule."

"Wonderful." Lucius could not help the smug smile that crossed his face.

"Am I to assume that she will be my client or is this merely for advice?" Reg was trying to find out what his duties would be.

"For now, it will just be advice, though I do hope that she will make use of your talents. I need you to put her at ease. She may be a bit apprehensive not only about the divorce I of course told her how it is generally viewed in the wizarding world but about having someone of your caliber at her disposal."

"So, she's Muggle-born?" Reg asked probingly having caught the undertones in Lucius' comments.

"She is. And I think that has contributed to some of her... difficulties. If you could take in mind her ignorance of some of the nuances of wizarding society, I believe it would help in your discussion with her. It is Mrs. Hermione Weasley," he added, realizing he had not told Reg who he was to meet with.

"You know that I am someone who reserves judgment. I will do what I can to make her feel comfortable, and I'll gladly keep all communication with the young lady under the strictest confidentiality." After a moment's pause, Reg asked, "Is there anything else I need to know?"

Lucius considered the question for a few moments as he watched his brandy swirl in the glass. "She was married soon after the war, ostensibly of her own volition, so this was not an arranged marriage. I don't believe there is a marriage contract."

"That will simplify matters," Reg responded. "Anything else?"

"No. I think that will be sufficient for now," Lucius replied.

"Then I bid you a good evening, Mr. Malfoy," Reg said as he rose, bowing his head slightly.

Lucius replied, "And to you." He knew that Reg was the best there was, but then he would not hire anyone other than the best. He could only hope that Hermione could be convinced to avail herself of his services if she decided to go through with the divorce. Lucius could think of no one else who could get her through this with her reputation intact.

He was smiling smugly and enjoying his drink when he was interrupted.

"Well, if it isn't the kneazle who ate the canary. What has you so happy?" Connor asked as he slid into the recently vacated seat across from Lucius.

"Connor? What are you doing here?" Lucius asked, surprised to have his reverie interrupted.

"Business dinner that just finished. I was on my way home when I saw that look in your eyes." Connor considered him a moment. "This wouldn't have anything to do with your mystery witch, would it?"

Lucius knew better than to try to lie. Depending on how things progressed, the identity of his mystery witch would not remain a mystery much longer, at least to Connor. "It does, though I would prefer not to go into details right now as nothing has been decided."

"Yet you clearly believe the winds are shifting in your favor," Connor offered.

"Perhaps," Lucius replied, draining his brandy and ordering another. "Only time will tell, but the more I learn, the more hopeful I become."

"Just be careful that you don't overstep your bounds," Connor cautioned.

Lucius knew that his friend did not approve of his interest in a married witch, but Lucius knew how to be careful about appearances. He would never do anything to let anyone think that he had anything to do with the breakup of a marriage. Of course, this was a marriage that was sorely in need of breaking up as far as he was concerned. He would prefer that he be the one whom Hermione chose, but almost anyone would be better than Weasley. "Oh, you know me. I know all the rules of society and have you ever known me not to abide by them?" he replied smugly as he drunk from his freshly refilled glass.

"Normally, yes, but you have not seen a witch socially in the last three years. That is most definitely not normal as far as the rules of society are concerned," Connor pointed out.

Lucius looked slightly uncomfortable. "Well, that may be, but you have seen the *quality* of witches who have shown their interest in me. Can you blame me for playing the grieving widower card for as long as I have?"

Connor chuckled. "No, I can't say that I can. But that still doesn't mean you should be careless with this new witch. You're playing with Fiendfyre," he warned.

Lucius sighed. "I am well aware of that fact. I had never intended for it to turn out this way. However, if she was truly happy in her relationship, it would not have turned out this way." He contemplated the swirl of his drink for several long seconds. "There are times when I think I should walk away, but then I know the way I feel, and I see the way she reacts when she's around me... I know it sounds trite, but we complete each other. I only hope that she will one day admit to herself how she feels."

Connor stared at him. "I do hope that you are considering your future should it not involve her. While I know you are quite confident, it could be possible your own feelings are getting in the way of interpreting hers. While you are usually right, you do make mistakes from time to time. And I have found that emotions can cloud good judgment."

Lucius knew that Connor had his best interests at heart, but Lucius also knew that he had no intention of losing to Weasley. It might not happen in the near future, but he intended to have Hermione. "I have the utmost patience with respect to this situation. While I may not care about appearances as much as I once did, I do understand what sort of effect handling this situation poorly could have." He paused a moment. "I do appreciate your concern, but you need not worry that I will do something foolish."

No, he would not do anything foolish, but he would continue to be her friend. He knew that she would need one now more than ever since her closest friends were also Weasley's relations. For him the biggest problem would be walking the fine line between providing support and courting her. No one could ever suspect that he had feelings for her, least of all her. Though he suspected that a part of her realized how he felt about her, that part that flirted back to him.

He would be the perfect gentleman, platonic friend. He would be there if she needed a shoulder to cry on or just someone to confide in. And hopefully by spending time with her, she would come to realize where she belonged.

Lucius returned home to his cavernous, empty manor and found his previous good mood ebbing away. He sighed as he mounted the stairs to put away his outer robes, barely noticing the ornate carvings on the newels that Narcissa had chosen during the renovation. It was always the same. The huge manor held so many memories, so many horrors. They had removed all physical traces of those horrors, but nothing would ever stifle the memories.

As he walked down the upstairs hall to his bedroom, he was still struck by the newness. Yes, some of the family's antiques had survived the occupation and searches by the Aurors, such as the serpent curtain hooks his twice great-grandmother had commissioned for the family wing, but much of it was new. He let his hand brush the heavy

velvet drapes as he walked by.

Once in his bedroom, he dumped his outer robe on a chair, stripped to his shirt sleeves and let his hair hang loose before he proceeded to his study to go through the day's correspondence the same routine as any other day. This small room had always been his sanctuary, one the Dark Lord and his minions had mercifully ignored.

It had been five years since the occupation had ended, and although the manor had been renovated and redecorated as soon as Lucius had access to the funds to do so, there were times late at night when he could still hear the echoes of the Dark Lord's voice.

He pushed those thoughts out of his mind and tried to remember the happier times, the times when the Malfoys would throw magnificent balls for all the major holidays. There would be dancing, laughing, happiness. Narcissa had rejoiced in getting to plan one of her balls. No detail was too insignificant for her. Even though they were always extravagant and expensive affairs, he had never been bothered with the cost. The happiness it brought Narcissa was worth every knut.

He sighed as he saw the stack of correspondence. There were three invitations to minor social events that he put off to the side. He would have his assistant send regrets tomorrow. There was a letter from a charity soliciting funds to save the Crumple-Horned Snorkack. He had no idea what that was and binned the letter. Some trivial letters from acquaintances that he found he just wasn't in the mood to deal with presently.

Rising to his feet he went to the sideboard and poured himself an ample measure of Scotch and decided to wander the halls. When he reached the end of the main hall, instead of turning right toward the ballroom and dining room, he turned left towards the storerooms and kitchen. As he walked down the smaller hall, he caught a glimpse of a portrait on the wall he had paid little attention to in recent years. It was the movement at the edge of the portrait that had caught his attention. His mother was serenely seated in a chair, with his father standing behind her, his hand possessively on her shoulder. He, as a young man of twenty, stood proudly to his father's right. On the right side of the portrait, he could occasionally see a glimpse of yellow Delilah.

He remembered that day. It had been a lovely late spring day, shortly after Delilah had graduated from Hogwarts. It had been their last family portrait. It has also been the last time he remembered her being truly happy. Two days later, Abraxas had announced her betrothal to a much older wizard.

For ten years she had suffered in her marriage, trying to make it work, trying not to bring shame on the family. Finally she had decided she could take it no longer and had filed for divorce. Their father had gone into a rage. He had forbidden her from pursuing the divorce due to the shame it would bring upon the family. She had insisted on seeing it through, and Abraxas had launched a media assault against her and disowned her from the family. At that point, all of her images had been banished from the household and this portrait had been moved to a secluded spot. Mentioning her name was forbidden.

But now... Now Lucius had come to realize that Delilah had done what was right for her, just as he hoped Hermione would do. While divorce was frowned upon, he had seen first-hand how miserable someone could be in a loveless marriage. How could he hope that Hermione would take the same path as his sister and allow Delilah to remain isolated from her family?

Lucius placed his hand on the right edge of the portrait. "I think it's time for you to come home, Delilah," he said softly to the bit of yellow skirt peeking at the edge of the frame. For a fleeting moment, he thought he caught a glimpse of her blonde hair.

Leaving his half-empty glass on a nearby table, he returned to his study, finally ready to reach out to his sister.

He sat at his desk and stared at the blank parchment for some time, tapping the quill against the side of his head as he thought about what to write.

Dearest Delilah,

I hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me for ignoring you for so long. I'll spare you the excuses. Merely know that I was wrong. I never should have let the old man dictate my behavior, especially after he was gone.

If you can forgive me, I would like to invite you back to the family. Much has changed over the years for me as I am sure it has for you, and I would enjoy the opportunity to catch up with you.

If you cannot... Well, I can't say that I blame you. I could have been a better man, should have been a better man.

I hope this finds you and your family well.

Your remorseful brother,

Lucius

He thought about writing a longer letter, longed to tell her everything that had happened, but he did not want to overwhelm her before he knew that she would even be interested in having him back in her life.

He would wait and if she wrote back to him, he could start filling her in bit by bit and even invite her to come for a visit, though he was sure it would not be in the immediate future, that she would want time get to know him again. He hoped that after all these years, this was one wrong that he could right.

A/N: As always, many thanks to the wonderful beaweasley2 for her magnificent assistance as my beta. I hope that you, dear readers, are enjoying this story as it unfolds. I know it has been a long journey that has taken far too much time due to a RL hiatus, but we are rolling towards the end and the journey is about half over now. Many thanks to those who have taken the time to leave reviews. Nothing warms an author's heart more than knowing people enjoy what they have written.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 29

Hermione is finally ready to make a change in her life, but is Ron ready to accept this change?

Hermione felt much better now that she had confided in someone. Never in a million years would she have thought that Lucius would be her confidant, but he had been the perfect friend. Listening, offering advice, but not judging. A part of her had hoped that he would have offered an opinion, but she knew that would be taking the easy way out. As he had said, she would have to be the one to make any decisions about her future.

When she Apparated home, she felt she was ready to face Ron. Surprisingly he was not there. She presumed that he was at The Burrow. She poured herself a glass of wine and checked the basket by Pigwidgeon's stand for the post, but it was empty. When she walked in the bedroom to change, she found a note stuck in the frame of the mirror.

Hermione,

I know you are mad at me but I don't know what I can say to make it better.

I'm staying with Harry and Ginny if you want to talk. I didn't mean to hurt you.

Love,

Ron

She set the note on the dresser, not sure what to make of it. It wasn't an apology. In fact, he had made it clear that he thought he had done nothing wrong, that she was the one responsible for the trouble they were having. That meant that he expected her to make the first step towards reconciliation. It frustrated her that after all these years he still didn't understand that a relationship required compromise from both parties. Now he was hiding out at Harry's, likely hoping they would side with him to convince her to his way of thinking.

At least she had the flat to herself tonight. It would give her time away from him to reflect on just what she wanted and to consider her options. She hated the idea of giving up; it was like admitting she'd failed. No, that wasn't fair, she reasoned. It would not be giving up. They had spent the last two years drifting apart, and she had spent the last three months trying to bring them closer together, but to no avail. It was not something she could do on her own. He had to want the same things she did or they would continue to drift further away until they really hurt each other.

She picked up the note and reread it. She wished that he had owed her that note. It's not like Pigwidgeon wouldn't have been able to find her, and it would have shown her how important she was to him.

It made her wonder how important she really was to Ron. She rationalized that he could have put it in the kitchen, like she'd have done if leaving a note for him, that way she'd see it right away. Or he could have set it on her on her favorite arm chair, where she would have likely noticed it soon after returning from work, any number of places more visible than the mirror in the bedroom. *Instead he'd taped it to her dresser, knowing I wouldn't see it until I changed my clothes, or right before getting ready for bed,* she realized with a twang.

She sat down on the bed with a heavy sigh, turning the note in her hands. Right now she was only important enough for a note on the mirror.

She couldn't help but think about the differences between Ron and Lucius. Yes, she knew that Lucius was much older than Ron, but Ron had not matured much since she had met him. And despite his efforts, he still had the expectation that she should be like his mum or sister, or Angelina and Fleur for that matter, happily contributing to the next Weasley Quidditch team. He still didn't understand her, or her desires or her needs in this relationship, what they needed in order for this relationship to work between the two of them.

Lucius on the other hand seemed to understand her all too well. He at least treated her as though she was the most important person in the world. He had asked her what was bothering her, helped her face her problem rather than continue to hide from it.

Besides what did a few years matter for having kids? So what if their kids were not in Hogwarts at the same time as his siblings' were? That would not be a bad thing. They'd make friends and probably still be on the house Quidditch team! Although, secretly, she hoped that at least one of her children would take after her and be studious. *Rubbish. That's not the point,* she thought in frustration, falling back onto her bed with a loud sigh of frustration. Ron didn't understand her he never had. Even when they did things as a couple it was what he wanted. *He doesn't like the things I do, and in all fairness, what interests him is boring to me.*

She thought back to her vacation and the conversations she had with Ron. They had agreed not to talk Quidditch, but she now realized they had talked about little more than the resort. Even then, Ron had never asked her what she had done during the week she was there alone; she had driven the conversation. On the other hand, she and Lucius had enjoyed conversations and hearty intellectual debates on a wide variety of topics. Talking with him had been so effortless. She knew that she should not be attracted to Lucius, but he provided her everything that her relationship with Ron was missing.

She reached over and grabbed her favorite decorative pillow her grandmother had given her for tenth birthday, hugging it for comfort. She was not considering leaving Ron because of Lucius it was because her relationship with Ron was broken. The two of them just did not have enough in common and had drifted apart. She did not even know if it was broken beyond repair, but a part of her suspected it might be. They wanted different things, and she did not think they could come to a compromise. Both of them were incredibly stubborn.

Besides, the society page had been publishing information suggesting that Lucius was tied to some witch in Germany. Edna, Emma, Elsa Something-or-other. He was nothing more than a good friend, someone she could confide in without it slipping to the wrong Weasley.

She got up and readied for bed, knowing her mind was in too much turmoil to enjoy reading anything.

As she lay in bed trying to find elusive sleep, her traitorous mind kept rehashing all the things where she and Ron differed, and as much as she hated admitting it, how much she had in common with one Lucius Malfoy.

Again Hermione slept fitfully. Her dreams were muddled, and if she was the sort who believed in Divination, she would pore over the books trying to make sense of them. As it was, she kept shaking them off. In more than one dream she found Ron morphing into Lucius. Of course, that was something she didn't need to be some sort of Seer to understand. Lucius showed her the sort of attention she craved from Ron.

Still not entirely rested, she headed to work and found a letter on her desk. It was on company letterhead, and she recognized Lucius' handwriting on the envelope. After looking around to make sure that no one was watching her, she opened the envelope and looked at the piece of paper.

I've made a noon appointment for you at the office of Mr. Reginald Forsythe.

L

She couldn't believe that he had got her an appointment today, not to mention during her lunch break. Of course, when you were Lucius Malfoy, you were able to do a lot of things that most people considered impossible. She was not sure that she was ready to speak to a solicitor, but she reasoned this was just a fact finding interview she was not committing to anything. She merely needed more information in order to make a reasonable, rational, well-informed decision about her future.

For the rest of the morning, she tried to focus on her work, but she was becoming more and more nervous as her appointment approached. She also found it hard to focus as she tried to imagine how the conversation would go. Thankfully she was able to make it to her lunch break without any lab accidents.

Finally, it was time for her to leave for her appointment. When she arrived at the office of Mr. Reginald Forsythe, she was hardly surprised to see a spacious, well-appointed office, clearly indicating that Lucius had recommended one of the best solicitors, one who she could most likely not afford to pay. But she could at least get the information she would need to decide if divorce was worth pursuing.

The receptionist had her wait a few minutes before admitting her to Mr. Forsythe's office. Again, she wasn't at all surprised that she was seeing the senior member of the

firm.

He greeted her warmly with a handshake. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Weasley. Mr. Malfoy informs me that you are here to discuss a very delicate subject. Please, have a seat." He indicated a sofa at the side of his office rather than the chair by the desk.

"Er, yes. You see, my husband and I have grown apart and we want different things and it may be best for us to separate," she began nervously.

He looked at her thoughtfully. "Mmm. I see. You don't mind if I use a Dict-A-Quill, do you?"

She nervously considered his request for a second before replying, "Not at all," lest he think she didn't trust him. Unlike Rita Skeeter's Quick Quotes Quill, the Dict-A-Quill impartially recorded everything people actually said. In fact she had found them quite useful when working on Potions because you didn't have to stop to take notes. You did have to be careful about mumbling to yourself, though, as the quill would record *everything* uttered, as if spoken loud and clear. She once noticed it even wrote down something she'd been thinking very hard on one day... that could be problematic.

"Thank you." He swished his wand and the quill and parchment sprang to life, floating beside them. "Now, how long have the two of you been married?"

"Five years."

"Any children?"

"No, and that's the problem." Forsythe arched an eyebrow at her in inquiry. "You see, he wants to start a family, and I'm not ready for that yet. I enjoy my work, and I know that once I start having kids that I'll have to give that up."

"I see," he replied in a neutral tone. "And I presume that is main cause of marital discord?"

"Well, sort of. We otherwise get along, mostly," she added tentatively. "But he and his family are really pressuring me to start a family, and I don't know that I can take that stress anymore. I've tried to tell him that if we wait a few more years, it'll be better, but well, I don't think he believes me."

"And do you want children?" he asked pointedly.

"At some point, yes, but it's not something I have to decide this minute," she replied defensively, used to arguing this point with Ron.

"Of course not," he replied in his maddeningly neutral tone.

She knew it was good to have a solicitor who was non-judgmental, but it felt frustrating to get no emotional reaction from him. "I just think that maybe we rushed into getting married after the war." They had been riding the emotional high from defeating Voldemort, surrounded by all the attention and all the questions about their relationship. It was as though the Wizarding World was willing them to get married, and without really considering the ramifications, that was exactly what they had done.

"How long did you know your husband before you were married?"

"Seven years, but six of those were at Hogwarts and then that one year we were on the run from Voldemort, well, he wasn't there most of that year. So there was really only about six months from the end of the war until our wedding. And we didn't formally date in school but we were very good friends," she added. She remembered how horrible things were her first year up until the troll and again how horrible he'd been when she'd told McGonagall about the Firebolt and the row they'd have her fourth year because she refused to carry messages for him like an owl. Of course there was also the incident surrounding Ron not asking her to the Yule Ball until the last minute. "Most of the time," she added quietly.

He contemplated her for several moments and then reviewed his notes. "You said you mostly got along. Can you elaborate?"

She opened her mouth to tell him she had not meant that, but closed her mouth and considered her answer. She glanced at the quill, poised perfectly still as if waiting patiently for her to continue speaking, as though it were judging her. After taking a deep breath, she replied, "It was good in the beginning." She started remembering the past. "Though, Harry was over a lot before Ginny graduated from school." She began to realize that she and Ron had not really spent that much time alone before getting married, and even the first couple of years of their marriage. "Everything was fine while Harry was around." She realized that their 'troubles' started after Ginny stopped playing Quidditch and Harry stopped spending as much time with them. "I guess we never realized how little we have in common." She looked down at her hands. "I'm a bit of a bookworm, and if it's not something that pertains to his job, he's not interested. You know how you can sit down with someone and have a long conversation, sometimes about nothing at all? We never really had that," she finally admitted.

She waited for him to speak, and then looked up at him when he'd said nothing. "What do you think?" she asked expectantly as the silence dragged on.

"As you may or may not know, divorce is not common in the wizarding world. The differing philosophy on children is grounds for divorce, but that is not the reason commonly invoked. The lack of commonality... Well, that begs other questions about why to have gotten married in the first place. Obviously if you could prove any sort of infidelity on his part, it would make things less convoluted."

She tried not to be shocked by this suggestion. "He's not that type of person. I don't really want to hurt him, I just don't think we are good as a couple we're too different."

"I see," he replied noncommittally. "I'm not going to mince words with you, Mrs. Weasley. The best way to handle this would be if you could get him to agree that you will both part ways. I know something of his family, so I'm not sure how likely that will be. If you can't convince him that dissolving the marriage is in your mutual best interests, this could be difficult. You would both have to testify before the Wizengamot, and you would have to convince them that you have ideological differences that make you incompatible. Questions will be raised about when these differences became evident whether before or after the marriage and anything that you admit you knew before the marriage will make it that much more difficult to gain the divorce."

She hadn't expected to have to prove to outsiders that their marriage should be dissolved. "Oh."

"It can get quite ugly. And because of who the two of you are, that could make it uglier."

He knew she was talking about both of them being heroes of the War. "But only if he contests it," she confirmed.

"That's correct."

"And if does contest, you think that I do have the grounds for it?" She knew this was the critical question.

"If it can be proven that you are being harassed about immediately starting a family and that you have made your wishes known. Since it is a matter of who said what, this can be hard to prove in court. But when you add in your other differences, it should be enough to tip the Wizengamot in your favor. The hardest part about this is that it may involve witnesses who may not wish to testify, though that is not a certainty."

"But if he agrees this is for the best?" she asked, hoping that she could get Ron to be reasonable.

"If he agrees it would be rather straightforward. You would submit your petition to the Wizengamot and they would approve it. There would of course be division of assets. If you own a house that could complicate matters."

"No, we're renting a flat. And I'm sure we could come to an agreement about the furniture and stuff." She was now glad they had never gotten around to buying a house. It just hadn't seemed important when it was the two of them.

She considered everything she had learned, trying to think of any other questions she might have, watching the Dict-A-Quill hovering beside her. It all seemed so academic here in Mr. Forsythe's office, even though she knew that it was anything but. "Thank you for your consult. You have given me a lot to think about it."

"It is my pleasure to do a favor for a friend of Mr. Malfoy. I only wish it were about a happier topic. I presume he has filled you in on the potential social ramifications?"

"Oh, yes, I know all about that. But I've never really been one to care what others think about me," she replied in what she hoped was an optimistic tone.

"Just know that the reason for your divorce will not sit well with many. The traditional role of the married witch is to be wife and mother, and you are essentially rejecting both of those roles," he cautioned.

"Thank you. I do know that, it's not that I don't want to be a mother just not now. I want to wait, and he's not, well, he doesn't see things the way I do. But that's only one of the reasons, you know." She knew that would be the most difficult part of the whole process if Ron were to contest, she was going against the traditional wizarding way of doing things. She rose to her feet, letting him know that she was ready to leave.

"Good day, Mrs. Weasley. And our offices are here should you need any further assistance," he offered warmly.

"Thank you, Mr. Forsythe. I'll keep that in mind," she replied politely, returning his handshake, before he showed her out.

Now she knew she had to talk to Ron about this and try to convince him that they would be better apart, and that he would be better with someone who wanted to be wife and mother first and foremost. It would not be easy, but then nothing in her life had been easy despite what anyone thought. This would just be one more difficult task for her to conquer. Of course, this would likely alienate her from almost all of the friends she had. If she had been less impulsive five years ago, not done what everyone expected of her, this all could have been avoided.

For the rest of the work day, Hermione found it incredibly difficult to concentrate on work. What she would say to Ron kept running through her head. She still hadn't really thought of a good way to bring divorce up. Every scenario she could come up with involved Ron freaking out. At this point she was reasonably sure that his freaking out was unavoidable.

When the work day wrapped up, she cleaned up her station and was just getting ready to leave when she noticed Lucius talking to Harold. Harold then turned to her. "Hermione, Mr. Malfoy would like to speak to you for a few minutes."

"Of course," she replied, sounding perhaps a bit too nervous.

Harold clasped his hand on her shoulder and said warmly, "Don't worry, you aren't in any trouble."

She gave him a reassuring smile and then followed Lucius as he walked out of the laboratory and to the conference area.

Once their door was closed, he said, "I was wondering how your consultation with Reg went."

"He didn't fill you in?" she asked, having expected him to have gotten the full report.

"My dear, even in the wizarding world there is attorney-client privilege," he replied instructively.

She hadn't even thought of that since she had never had reason to consult a solicitor. "Oh. It was informative. I think I have all the information that I need."

"I'm glad for that. If you have any other questions that Reg didn't answer for you, I thought I'd give you one last opportunity to decide before you possibly act on the information you have. I want to make sure that you *fully* understand the social implications if you do decide to file for divorce," he said seriously.

"I understand that it will likely be the scandal of the century," Hermione replied. "But that's only if he chooses to make it so. I'm hoping that he can be convinced to keep this low key and to just let us both get on with our lives." The more she had been thinking about it, the more she realized that their relationship was no longer one of husband and wife.

He gave her a reassuring smile. "I hope that you are right. And remember, if you have questions, please do not hesitate to ask me. Your husband has the advantage that he was raised in the wizarding world to a wizarding family. Do not underestimate that advantage," he said seriously.

"I won't. And thank you again. I really appreciate you arranging my consult with Mr. Forsythe."

Lucius urged, "If you need his services again..."

She cut him off. "I'll take care of myself. While I do appreciate being able to speak with him, I'm pretty sure the rates his firm would charge would be a bit out of my league."

"Of course," he replied simply and nodded in acquiescence. "Do be careful in how you handle this."

"I'll be fine," she reassured, for her as much as for him. He gave her an encouraging smile before leaving.

Since Hermione knew that Ron generally got home from work later than she did, she decided to wander Diagon Alley a bit and try to sort her thoughts out. When she found herself outside Flourish and Blott's, she decided to see if the latest issue of *Potions Quarterly* had arrived. As she was perusing the professional journals, a photograph of Lucius on the sidebar of the *Witch Weekly* caught her eye. She picked up the magazine and saw the sub-headline "Is Britain's Most Eligible Bachelor Off the Market? Pg. 12"

Normally she wasn't one to read the gossip section, but she found herself flipping to page twelve.

Ladies, could Lucius Malfoy be off the market before we even knew he was on it? The debonair and reclusive widower has been spotted at some of Frankfurt's finest restaurants in the company of the beautiful and highly available Elsa Schwartz over the last few weeks. Ostensibly this is all in the name of business, but witnesses report otherwise.

According to an unnamed waiter, "I have seen how they look into each other's eyes and I can see the sparks."

From another unnamed source, "The way they laugh at each other's jokes, that is more than business."

Could this Germanic vixen have done what none of Britain's finest could do find a way in Lucius' grieving heart? Are more trips to Germany in his future? Time will tell, but based on reports, I think that may be the case.

There was also an accompanying photograph showing them at a restaurant table, apparently sharing an intimate moment.

Hermione closed the magazine and shoved it back on the rack. She couldn't believe she had read that drivel. And what did it matter anyway? It's not like someone like Lucius would be attracted to someone like her. Witches and wizards could just be friends look at her and Harry. And that's exactly what they were and would remain, no matter what her imagination tried to tell her. It was all because she had read that silly romance novel while on vacation. Her mind had just taken to projecting the novel into her subconscious because Ron and Lucius mirrored the main characters in that silly novel.

She left Flourish and Blott's and wandered down Diagon Alley, trying to get thoughts of Lucius out of her mind.

Finally she decided it was time to get this over with, and she Apparated to Godric's Hollow. "Hi, Ginny, is Ron around?" she asked as she gave her sister-in-law a hug.

"No, they're still at work." As per usual, with one look, Ginny could tell that something was bothering Hermione. "Is everything alright?"

Hermione knew better than to lie to Ginny. "No, but I don't really want to talk about it."

"Are you sure? It might make you feel better," Ginny offered hopefully.

Hermione knew that Ginny was used to Hermione confiding in her, that she had vented some of her frustrations about Ron's behavior in the past, but this was something she had to discuss with Ron first. Of course, once she did, she was pretty sure that Ginny wouldn't want to talk to her ever again. "I'm sure."

Ginny looked at her skeptically a few seconds before saying, "Well then, why don't you give me a hand with feeding the kids?"

Hermione smiled. "Sure." She really didn't have anything against kids and enjoyed spending time with her nieces and nephews, but she just wasn't ready for one of her own.

After half an hour, Ron and Harry arrived. Ron smiled when he saw her. "Hermione!" he said excitedly, though his smile faded when he saw she was not as excited to see him as he was to see her.

"Hi, Ron. Ready to go home?" Hermione asked, hoping her voice wasn't giving anything away.

"Sure. Harry, Ginny, see you later," he said before leaving with Hermione.

Once they were home, he said, "Look I know I was a git..."

She put her hand up to stop him from saying anything else. "Have you ever noticed how many times you have to make that apology?"

He ruffled his hair. "Yeah, well..."

"And did you ever notice how many times you are apologizing for the same thing?"

She could see in his eyes that he realized that this conversation was not going to be one of their usual kiss and make up moments. "What are you saying?"

She had hoped she would have had more time to work up to it since he normally did not read between the lines this well. Well, she'd soften if as much as she could. "Are you really happy in our marriage?"

"Of course I am," he replied defensively.

"Ron, are you happy. I mean, really, really happy?" She put up her hand to stall the normal, yeah response. "I'm serious about this," she asked, hoping to get him to really look deep down at his emotions.

Rather than answer, he flung the question back at her. "Are you really happy?" he asked with a voice that said he did not really want to hear the answer.

"I'm mostly content, but I'm not really happy because I can't make you really happy." When he did not say anything she continued. "You want a family and you want it now. I'm not ready for that yet. You want a date for when I will be, but I can't give you one. I'd prefer to wait years, but I know you don't. It's causing a lot of stress for both of us because neither one of us is willing to budge. So are you really, really happy? And can you say that if it's another five or ten years before I'm ready before we have kids?"

"And that's not all. You know that I'm not into Quidditch, and... well... When was the last time you wanted to discuss anything new and innovative, or have been willing to let me tell you about a new theory or charm or transfiguration or well, anything that interests me?"

"You aren't saying...?" he asked, clearly unable to use the word.

"I think it's best for both of us," she said softly, forcing herself to meet his eyes. "I want my career, and you want me to stay at home and raise a family. You can't get much more different than that."

He was clearly in shock. "But it's not heard of! What will everyone think? Whose idea was this?" he demanded.

She ignored his last question. "So are you saying we doom ourselves to a life of misery? Seriously, Ron, think hard about the last several years. How many happy moments have we had? How many romantic evenings have we shared? What do we really have in common to build a solid relationship on?" She knew those questions would hurt, but that was the point.

He rose to his feet, his face flushing red in anger. "Well if that's the case, why did you marry me?" he demanded.

She had expected his tirade. "Because I loved you, and I thought we could be good together. I thought we could respect each other that we had enough between us to build a relationship on, but clearly I was mistaken." She realized her anger was feeding off his and moderated her voice a little. "Ron, I do care about you, love you and I value your friendship, but I don't know that it's enough for a marriage. In the euphoria following the war, we both lost track of who we really were. We were there for each other to bring each other through the emotional aftermath, but since then... You can't deny that we have drifted apart."

"Did you ever think that that was because you buried yourself in your work, that you were never at home to spend time with me?" he snarled.

This hit home for her and she stood up, staring him down. "And on those days when I did come home on time, then what? How many times did you choose to go to a Quidditch match or listen to one on the Wireless over spending the evening doing something together? How many times did you turn down suggestions I gave on something to do together because you just weren't interested in it? When have you ever done something that interested me? We went two years without taking a vacation together, and when we did, well..."

"How many times did you bend? I suggest stuff but you don't want to do them you'd rather read a book. I know you don't like Quidditch so I go without you. We go to book shops because you want to. We go out to eat where you want to go because you don't feel like cooking. How many times do we try something that I liked? Not many," he said defensively.

"We do do things you want to do." She furrowed her brows as she glared at him, her eyes sparking in anger. "That's because all you ever want to do is to stay in or to go visit Harry or your family but when we do visit your family, have you ever stood up to your mother for me? No, you don't. You let her nag me until I've had enough and beg you to leave."

"I agree with my mum I want a family. Everyone else is having children; she's only asking when we will. You talk about me not wanting to compromise well, how about you? How much have you been willing to compromise?" he shot back.

She bit her lip as she listened to his words. She had tried at first, but as time went on... He was right, she'd stopped trying and started working later and later or avoiding him all together. She had to get him to see that for himself. "And that's exactly why we aren't good together as husband and wife. Neither of us is willing to bend for the other, because this isn't something that can be a compromise it's one or the other. One of us would have to cave in, and I know neither of us want to because then we would have to bend too far. One of us would have to give up our needs and wants, but that's the problem. We would have to lose part of ourselves to get there." She gave

him a few seconds to take in what she had said. "Ron, we are good as friends, great even, but as a married couple... everyone makes mistakes," she finished quietly.

"So that's what you think marrying me was?" he shouted. "Is it just a mistake because you couldn't bend me to your will, change me into your idea of the perfect man?" he accused

She suddenly realized what she had said and wished she could have it back. "No, because I think I'd break if I bent ~~to~~ your will. I'd have to stop being who I am, and I can't do that. I don't know that it was a mistake to marry you, but I think we just went along, rushed into marriage too quickly, and didn't take the time to really have a normal life. A boyfriend-girlfriend dating no dark wizard or something trying to kill us life. I think that we weren't ready. There were all sorts of questions that neither of us thought to ask. Things normal couples do. We were young and in lust. Once that lust was gone... where has that left us?" She wasn't sure that this was going to make it any better.

"So it was a mistake," he said quietly as he turned away from her.

Her heart sank. His tone of voice just made her seem like a failure, even though she knew they had both played a role in their marriage falling apart.

He walked away from her and headed towards the door. "I need some space," he said quietly as he slipped out the door.

She had expected that sort of response. All she could do now was wait.

After a couple of hours, there was a knock at the door. Hermione opened it and was not entirely surprised to see Harry. "Hi, Harry," she said weakly, knowing that he had come over to get her side of the story. "Come on in."

He came in, but he didn't take a seat. "Ron tells me you want a divorce. Well, not quite that simply, but that's what he said. Is that true?" he asked.

She sighed. The way Harry asked the question, it only hammered home how she felt like a failure. "It is. Harry, it's just too tough between the two of us, there's too much distance. Surely you can't be blind to that."

"It's a very big decision," he said simply. "Ginny and Ron told me how the Wizarding World views divorce."

"I know that. And it's one I've been thinking about since my vacation. This isn't something I decided on a whim," she said defensively. She hoped that Harry would be rational and listen to her reasoning.

"Why?"

"I'm sure that Ron filled you in on everything," she replied, not sure she wanted to go through spelling everything out to Harry.

"He did, but I wanted to hear from you. We both know how Ron can be," Harry joked, trying to add some levity to the situation.

She smiled weakly at Harry's comment. "We do. Basically, we just want different things from life. He wants me to be more like his mother, and I, well, want to be more like my mother. I want a job, a career, to make a difference, wait a few more years before starting a family." She hoped that would be enough to satisfy Harry's curiosity.

"Have you tried to work things out with Ron?" Harry asked, clearly not wanting to see his best friends at odds again.

"We've been trying this for months now, and there's nothing to work out. We're at an impasse on the children front. Not to mention that we don't really have a lot in common. We've just drifted too far apart over the years. What does it say when I'm happiest when I'm at work?" she asked pointedly.

Harry looked at her sadly. "Is that last part really true?"

"It is," she admitted reluctantly. "I still love Ron, but more like a brother. I just don't see that we have enough in common to make this work. I think we would both be happier apart. That way he could find someone whose views more closely match his."

"Hermione, you knew who Ron was when you decided to marry him," Harry said, clearly unhappy with what was transpiring.

She sighed. "Yes, to a point. Harry, we were young, in lust and on an emotional roller coaster from the War. We were alive, happy to be alive, euphoric almost. Everyone talked about what a great couple we were, and it was expected that we would get married by everyone Ron's folks, you, the press, everyone. In that rush, there were a lot of things that we didn't ask each other, things that we should have discussed before we got married, things we forgot about the other person. It's always been a bit tumultuous between me and Ron and after he came back, well, I just kind of pushed away the ugliness of the past, thought he had changed. You have to admit that everything was rushed after the end of the War."

"It did, but, Hermione, Ginny and Ron have told me how divorce is viewed in the wizarding world," he said seriously.

Hermione interrupted before he continue, "I know that. But, Harry, neither one of us is happy, and in thinking about it, a lot of the stress in my life has been because of my relationship with Ron. You know I'm always mad at him for something or another. We fight all the time. He's spent a fair few nights in your spare room. We never talk much when we are both home, and neither one of us thought it was important to plan a vacation together for more than two years. We've lived in the same house, but we've been leading separate lives for a couple of years now. The most we've talked has been about kids and that has always led to an argument. And I can live with the stigma that's going to come from this." She knew her job was secure, and it wasn't like she mingled in society circles anyway.

"But what about Ron? Did you think about how he would react to that?" Harry asked pointedly.

"Yes I did, and I still think it's for the best. I just thought that it would make him happy to be able to move on with his life and find someone who's a better match, someone who wants the same things in life he does." She knew that Harry had to see reason given how well he knew the two of them. He was just in denial, like she had been for so long.

"He really loves you, and you know he never wanted to hurt you," Harry said in Ron's defense.

"That's what he says, but he keeps hurting me over and over. We keep having the same argument over and over. I just can't take it anymore. I've spent five years trying to make this work, and we just haven't been able to do that. I'm tired, Harry, really tired," she admitted.

"Maybe some time apart would be good?" he offered hopefully. "I told Ron he could stay with us, and he asked me to pack some things up for him since he'll probably be staying for a while."

"Maybe, but I'm not going to hold my breath. I'll go get his things." She went to the bedroom and quickly packed a bag using magic. She then returned to the living room and gave it to Harry.

"Think about this," Harry said. "I hate to see the two of you this way." He put his hand on her arm and gave a squeeze.

She smiled sadly. "I don't like it either, but I really do think we will both be happier in the long run if we separate. And I'm sorry to have put you and Ginny in the middle of this."

He gave her a hug. "It's alright. I just don't like to see either of you hurting."

"Thanks, Harry. And let him know that I do care about him and that's why I want to do this." She watched him leave, a sadness in her eyes because she knew that this

would forever change her relationship with him. After all, he had been friends with Ron first and Ron's family was really the only family he had ever known.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 29

Lucius continues to reach out to Hermione and be the friend she dearly needs while dealing with the complications in his life.

Chapter 17

Lucius was growing concerned about Hermione. While he could not show a lot of overt interest in her in the work environment, he was able to keep tabs on her to a point. He had reviewed the logs and seen that she was coming in earlier and leaving later than everyone else.

And while he did not normally like spying on people, he knew that she was not spending much time at home and it was not because her husband was there.

Since nothing had been reported in the *Daily Prophet*, he also surmised that she hadn't yet filed for divorce. And while it was obvious she was not happy in her marriage, he also knew how scandalous divorce was in the wizarding world. His sister had been forced to leave the country after she had divorced her husband, and at the behest of his father, he had cut off all contact with her.

But for Hermione, he would do everything in his power to spare her the ostracization that Delilah had gone through. That was why he had sent her to Reg. For now she was resisting using his services, nervous about the cost, but as time passed, he had no doubt that she would accept Reg's assistance, especially if she understood why he wanted to help.

While he did not know exactly where she was spending her time, he had a very strong suspicion and headed over to the library. He saw her sitting in the history section and slid into the chair across from hers. "Hiding at the library, Hermione?" Lucius asked.

She looked up from her book. "I prefer it to sitting at home alone," she replied simply and closed her book.

He thought she looked tired and could tell that her estrangement with her husband was taking a physical toll on her. "There are other places to go for company," he stated simply.

"At those types of places, people generally want to talk to you. I'm not much of a conversationalist," she replied morosely.

"My dear, you do yourself a great disservice with that statement. I think that you are a wonderful conversationalist." He knew that she needed someone to pick up her spirits, and it looked like he was the only one willing to help her. Clearly her friends had abandoned her, which was not surprising considering her closest friends were her in-laws. "Come, the library is closing soon, and you look like you could use some company."

She smiled wanly. "I could. Thank you." She neatly stacked her books and let him lead her out of the library.

They walked in silence until there were at a nearly deserted area. He stopped and turned to face her. "If you will permit me?" he asked as he held out his hand.

She cautiously took hold of his hand, and he Apparated them to his club.

"Have you eaten yet?" he asked cordially, even though he was reasonably sure he knew the answer.

"No, I went straight to the library from work," she replied, her voice betraying her level of exhaustion.

"Well then, I will insist that you join me for dinner. I can't let you go hungry," he replied casually.

As they ate, he made it a point to keep her mind off of her personal life disintegrating. Instead he engaged her on such topics as world travel and some of the latest articles in the journals. Their conversation made her perk up, and they both learned that while she knew a great deal about the Muggle sights of the world, she was not as well educated on the wizarding ones. A part of him wanted to promise to show her some of the sites he'd mentioned that she'd never even heard of, but he knew that was not possible at this moment. He would have to wait before he could do that.

For now he had to support her in whatever decision she was making and not push her to make the one he wanted. While he knew that she would never be happy with Weasley, he also recognized that he could not seem to force the issue with her. He had to make her come to that realization on her own. Given the fact that she had not mentioned Weasley often while they were at Merlin's Cove, he took that as a sure sign that their marriage had become loveless.

Lucius was not entirely sure how she felt about him, but for now he would cultivate their friendship in the hopes that when the time came it would grow into something more.

When he made her laugh, it warmed his heart in a way he had not felt since Narcissa's passing. It was a musical, mirthsome laugh, a genuine laugh, not the sort of false laugh he received when making a joke in a social circle. He had not lied to her when he had said that she made him feel years younger.

There were times now at the half century mark where he did start to feel his age, that his younger years were behind him, even though he was still in the prime of his life. It would be another twenty years or so before he would be considered middle aged, and he would not be considered elderly until much closer to the century mark. But prior to letting her into his life, he had lost much of his zeal for living.

Now that he had found another woman worthy to be his wife, he did not want to lose her. Unfortunately, because she was married, he would have to proceed with caution. Of foremost importance was helping her navigate the mine field of wizarding divorce. While he personally did not care if scandal surrounded her divorce, he knew that it might have consequences for his holdings.

"Goodness, look at the time," he said as he heard the clock chime eleven. Neither of them had realized how late it was.

"Is it really that late?" Hermione asked, her voice slightly slurred from the copious amounts of wine they had drunk.

"I'm afraid it is." He rose from his chair, intending to be a gentleman and helping her from her chair. He just didn't realize how much help he would be giving her as she proved to be very unsteady on her feet. "Careful, my dear," he said as he wrapped his arm around her waist to steady her.

"Oh, I'm feeling a bit light-headed," she said as she leaned against him for support.

He enjoyed the feel of her in his arms, but knew it was only because she had overindulged. Once he was sure that she would not lose her balance, he reached down and picked up her glass of water. "Take a sip of that and wait a moment for it to pass."

After a few moments, the color returned to her face and she seemed slightly steadier on her feet. "I'm feeling a little better. Thanks."

He kept his arm wrapped around her waist. "Perhaps I ought to escort you home. I'm not sure that you are up to Apparating," he offered, knowing that he was right and that she would Splinch herself if she tried.

She looked as though she was going to protest, but said, "I think you might be right."

Once they were in the lobby, she gave him her address, and he expertly Apparated them to her front door.

"How is it you aren't as drunk as I am?" she asked as she fumbled for her keys.

He could tell that her eyes were losing focus. "My dear, I don't think you are quite as used to wine as I am."

"I s'pose not," she replied as she finally managed to get the door open.

He wasn't sure that she would get to bed without help, so he let her lead him to the bedroom where she collapsed. He pulled the covers aside and gently removed her shoes before moving her to that side of the bed and covering her. As he drew the covers up, he leaned over her, marveling at the delicate features of her face, the faint freckles on her nose, the perfection of her lips. Without thinking, he bent down to bestow a kiss on those perfect lips. He paused, his lips coming within a ghost's whisper of hers, so close that he could feel the faint caress of her breath on his lip. Just as he was about to press his lips against hers, she muttered "not tonight." He realized how precariously close he was to indelibly ruining any chance he could have with this woman by behaving so impulsively, and he shifted his potion carefully and placed a slow chaste kiss on her forehead.

After kissing her gently on the forehead, he whispered, "Sleep well, Hermione." He then made sure her flat was secure before he Apparated home to his cavernous, soulless manor. He knew why Hermione was spending so much time library...the same reason he did. It was the same reason he preferred walking the halls of his empty buildings at the end of the day. He had finally grown tired of the loneliness.

He had never really thought of himself as a lonely man, but he realized that since Severus' death, there were not many he would consider a true friend. There was Connor and there were a few others who he was more prone to confide non-personal matters in, but he had never kept a coterie of friends. And of course he had shunned Narcissa's attention because he knew they were not interested in who he was, but rather in being the next Mrs. Malfoy. It had been much the same when he had courted Narcissa.

He had patiently waited to earn Narcissa's favor, and he could do that again with Hermione. Patience was one thing he had in abundance.

He walked the empty hallways of the manor for some time, not really noticing the sumptuous surroundings that had always been a part of his life. Ever since Narcissa's passing it had ceased being a home and had turned into a house, a very empty house.

Yes, Draco and his family would come for visits from time to time, but he got the impression that Draco found the house as empty as he did, and they never stayed for very long.

He wondered what Draco would think of him pursuing relationship with one of his classmates. He knew that Draco had found accepting the Muggle-borns easier than he had, probably because he had been forced into the Dark Lord's service rather brutally. Draco was encouraging him to find another woman, but he seriously doubted that his son meant with one his age.

That was another bridge to be crossed when the time came. His love life was not up for debate by his son. The hardest part would be to convince Hermione. Earning her friendship had not been that difficult, but convincing her to advance their relationship would be something different. Of course, she had not once referred to him as Draco's father, so perhaps that was a good sign.

He stood on the balcony looking over the garden and gripped the railing. The more time he spent around her, the more difficult he found it to control his desires. Tonight he had almost lost control, and he was sure that he had nearly ruined any chance that he would have with her.

"You have to be careful," he admonished himself. "Take your time, be patient."

She was worth the wait, and he would do what he could to protect her, to keep the wizarding world from destroying her reputation. It was the least he could do for her. Given time she would see how right they were for each other.

On Saturday morning, Lucius finally addressed the mail that had been piling up during the week. On top of the stack was another letter from Delilah, and he smiled at the thought of reading another letter from his sister. She had tentatively reached out to him in her first letter, apparently not sure if Lucius was sincere, but since then they had been writing back and forth, trying to cover nearly twenty years' worth of estrangement. He thought their relationship was almost to the point where he could consider extending an open invitation for her to visit when it suited her. He knew that would be a difficult invitation to accept given the circumstances under which she left the country, but he hoped that in time she would come.

Dear Lucius,

I have so enjoyed hearing from you after all these years. It sounds as though Draco has grown into a wonderful young man, though that seems so difficult to believe. He is stuck in my mind as the young boy of five he was when I last saw him, and now he has a son of his own. Have we really gotten that old?

A few months ago, Lucius wouldn't have thought twice about being a grandfather. In fact Scorpius had been one of the bright spots in his life, but now... With all the time he spent around Hermione he most definitely did not feel that old.

I fear I have nothing new to write to you. I have already told you all about the girls and daily life on the farm here is rather boring compared to your world of business acquisitions. I would love for you to meet my family. If your travels ever bring you to Italy, please do stop by for a visit. I think that you would like Vittorio, though you might want to brush up on your Italian as his English is not so good. If you would like to meet your nieces, your visit would have to be this upcoming week as they return to school the following week.

With love

Delilah

Lucius would have to check his schedule, but he was sure that he could find time for a trip to visit Delilah in the next week. It would be good to finally see her again. And hopefully she could be convinced to come to visit his family at some point.

Looking at the clock on the mantle, he saw that it was nearly lunchtime and that Draco, Astoria and Scorpius should be arriving soon. His reply to Delilah would have to wait until later. As the weather was clear, he decided they should spend time in the garden. Lucius had always enjoyed the garden. It did not feel empty like the inside of the manor did.

Lunch was pleasant with conversation ranging from young Scorpius' latest antics he had taken to chasing the garden gnomes at the inn to how well the inn was going, and how Draco was looking for another property to buy. He had recently hired a manager to help run the inn so he would have more time to devote to expansion. He was investigating an old wizarding castle on the Island of Skye with the possibility of reviving the adjoining and long defunct Firewhiskey distillery. Astoria told him of their plans to decorate each of the rooms in themes depicting the wizarding clans and Lucius couldn't help smiling proudly at his son's success.

So far Draco had shown no interest in the family business, but Lucius wasn't worried. He knew that he was still young by wizarding standards and in good health. Besides, he thought that Draco would gain valuable business experience from being on his own for a while.

And the fact that Draco was doing so well proved that point. When Draco had first enquired about the old family castle, Lucius had decided it would make a suitable wedding present. He had been a bit shocked when Draco had informed him the castle would become an inn, but Lucius was not one to take back a gift, so he had watched and waited to see how Draco did with his first business venture and had been pleasantly surprised. Lucius had not originally approved of Draco converting the old family castle into an inn, even though no Malfoy had lived there for close to two hundred years, but the renovations he and Astoria made pleased him as did the inn's success.

After lunch, Astoria took Scorpius to go explore the garden and chase the fairies and butterflies that made their homes amongst the myriad of flowering trees and shrubs, leaving father and son to talk.

"So... who is she?" Draco asked probingly, looking away from his son gleefully trying to catch a fairy.

Lucius was taken aback by the question and arched an eyebrow at his son as he asked, "Whatever do you mean?"

"Come now, you look happier than I've seen you in a long time. There is a spring in your step, for Merlin's sake, Father. So who is this new ladylove of yours? Is it Elsa?" asked Draco curiously.

"So you approve of the idea of me being in love with another witch," he replied evasively, hoping that his feelings towards Hermione were obvious to Draco only because of their close relationship as father and son. He turned to watch Scorpius squealing in delight as a flock of fairies started circling around the boy, just out of reach of curious little hands. How he missed the sounds of a happy child.

"I miss Mum, too, but I think we both know she wouldn't want you to be alone and miserable for the rest of your life, so yes, I approve."

"Then I shall inform you when I have found my ladylove." Now was not the time to reveal anything to Draco, especially since the object of his affection did not know how he felt about her. If Draco, like everyone else who read the gossip pages, wanted to believe his change in demeanor was because of his interest in Elsa, he would not do anything to change that opinion.

Realization dawned on Draco. "Then she doesn't know how feel about her."

"As I told you after the war, courting a woman is a slow process to be undertaken gradually, especially given who we are," Lucius replied in a calculated manner.

"I'm sure she will be flattered. After all, what woman wouldn't be flattered to be courted by you?" Draco said as he grinned and held his glass up in salute.

Lucius returned the salute and flashed a confident grin. "Indeed." He wanted to believe those words, but he knew that Hermione was far more complex than your average witch.

"Well, if you need any advice, let me know," Draco offered, and they both had a good laugh about the son offering the father dating advice.

"I assure you that I am more than capable of handling this on my own," Lucius replied confidently.

"Well then, I wish you the best in your pursuit and I look forward to meeting her."

Lucius tried to keep his expression neutral since he knew that Draco already knew the object of his affection. He hoped that Draco would be so pleased for him once the reality was revealed.

Lucius returned to Frankfurt on Monday to finalize the merger contract. Everything seemed to be in order and this should be nothing more than a mere formality, but he knew that there was always something that crept up at the last minute and threatened to derail a deal. There was always that 'one more thing' that someone wanted. For once, he was not the one who would be presenting that one more thing. The deal was quite favorable toward his interests, and he knew that Elsa had very little choice if she wanted to see her company survive.

It was mid-afternoon when he and his party arrived. With him was his personal assistant, team of three lawyers and translator. He detested traveling with a large retinue, but knew that it was necessary for the final step of the merger when there were far too many details for one person to keep track of.

He was escorted to the conference room where Elsa had a similar contingent with her. She smiled fondly at him. "Mr. Malfoy, a pleasure to see you again. I look forward to finalizing our merger."

He returned her smile. "As do I." He knew that once this was concluded that he would have more time for Hermione, and he thought she might require his guidance.

They all took their seats at the table, other than Reg, who as the senior attorney would be handling the paperwork. Lucius waited patiently as Elsa and her team conducted a final review of each piece of paper before signing it. He knew that it was a very big step to agree to give up control of a company that had been in the family for generations, and he would not rush her despite his desire to conclude his business as quickly as possible.

It was early evening before everything was satisfactorily signed and notarized for filing with the proper agencies in both countries. He rose and offered Elsa his hand. "Congratulations and welcome to the Malfoy Industries family. I know that you have made the proper decision for the future of the Kesselwerks."

"I'm sure that I have and look forward to what I can learn from you. Now that our business is concluded, I believe a celebratory dinner is in order." She was still holding his hand and softly rubbing the back of it with her thumb.

"Of course. Though I believe that proper protocol is that dinner is my treat." He smiled and fought the urge to pull his hand away from hers. He really did not want to go to dinner with her, but it would have been improper to decline the invitation.

"If you don't mind, might I suggest a marvelous restaurant in Paris? Nothing here in Frankfurt seems proper to celebrate something of this magnitude," she said with smile.

He saw the glint in her eye, but could think of no good reason to deny her request, nor could he think of a suitable restaurant within Apparition distance. Even though the merger was technically complete, he would still be working closely with her for the next month or so to advise her on the rebuilding of her business, and he did not want to do anything that would sour their relationship. "I shall defer to your judgment. I'll meet you at the Rue de Magique," he said before she could offer to Apparate him to their destination.

She let go of his hand and looked slightly disappointed. "It's not far from the Apparition point."

Lucius walked out of her office and gave a few last instructions to his team before they left to return to Britain. Once he was clear of the gates, he sighed and did his best to mentally prepare for the celebratory dinner he was about to share.

When he arrived at the Rue de Magique, he had some time to window shop before Elsa arrived. Unfortunately all the nearby shops catered to women, and he presently had

no one to bestow any of the lovely gifts he was admiring.

He was looking at the display of a jeweler's when Elsa slid beside him and looped her arm in his rather presumptuously. "They have very lovely pieces, ja?"

"That they do," he responded as smoothly as possible. She had changed out of her professional robes into something definitely suited for an evening out. Her deep blue dress hugged every curve and displayed an almost obscene amount of cleavage. Ever the gentleman, he added, "You look quite lovely."

She smiled warmly at him. "Thank you. Since we are celebrating I was in the mood to wear something more festive. I'm glad it meets with your approval."

He wasn't sure that he did approve, but there was no diplomatic way to tell her so. "Shall we?" he asked, hoping to end the evening as quickly as possible, though he knew that was still several hours away. Her behavior was precisely why he had done nothing to let anyone know that he was interested in pursuing a social life, why he had let the right witch run into him quite literally.

She led him down the road to a very posh restaurant, and definitely one that catered to couples. This was the type of restaurant where he used to take Narcissa for an intimate dinner, not where he expected to go to celebrate a business deal.

When they entered the maître de greeted her warmly in French. "Mademoiselle Elsa, a pleasure to see you again."

"Robert, you are too kind," she replied in English. "We will need a table for two."

He looked down at the book on the podium. "Oui. Though I am afraid it will take a few moments for your table to be ready, so perhaps you would like to enjoy a drink at the bar?"

Elsa looked to Lucius, who replied in perfect French, "We'll wait at the bar, then."

When they were seated at the bar and had ordered cocktails, Elsa said, "Ah, vous parlez français."

From the gleam in her eye, Lucius began to wish that he had not instinctively responded in French. "I do," he replied, switching back to English. He felt any of his comments were less likely to be misunderstood if he used his native tongue. "I have spent quite a bit of time in France as I own a chateau near Toulon."

"A lovely city, though I prefer Marseilles. It seems you are full of surprises." She gave him a playful grin.

"I believe that most people are quite full of surprises. Even after twenty years of marriage, Narcissa continued to surprise me." He hoped that bringing up his deceased wife might dampen Elsa's advances.

"Good surprises, I hope."

"For the most part," he replied simply. "Though unfortunately not all surprises in life are good."

"That is true. I will consider my good fortune that you were interested in my company." She raised her glass in salute.

"It is a business arrangement that is beneficial to us both," he replied, returning her salute.

"Hopefully *very* beneficial," she said suggestively.

Before Lucius could say anything to explain that it was merely a business arrangement, the maître de arrived to show them to their table.

While he was perusing the menu and wine list, Lucius was considering how to proceed. He knew they would be working together quite closely as he helped her reorganize her management structure, but he didn't believe it was fair to let her think there was a chance their relationship could be something more. When their waiter arrived he ordered a bottle of wine, escargot for appetizer and duck confit with ratatouille for his meal, while Elsa ordered the foie gras with fig compote.

"I hope that you will enjoy the wine. It's a personal favorite," he said realizing he had chosen the wine without consulting her.

"I'm sure that it will be excellent. You have impeccable taste."

Thankfully, he was saved from further conversation by the sommelier's arrival. The wine was excellent as he had expected. Once the glasses were poured and they were left alone, he raised his glass in toast. "To a successful business partnership."

"To a successful partnership."

He had the distinct impression that her omission of the word 'business' was not accidental. Setting down his wine glass, he said, "While I know that the acquisition is technically complete, there is still quite a bit of work remaining to restore your business to its former glory."

"Which will require guidance from you. I'm looking forward to working together and learning from you." Under the table, she let her foot brush against his leg.

He shifted away from her touch. Clearly, he was not getting his message through to her. "I will try to be as instructive as possible so that we can restore the Kesselwerks to profitability quickly." He was trying to remain practical, but she was being very flirtatious. When Narcissa had still been alive, he had the occasional witch flirt with him, and he had found it flattering, but now, he was definitely finding it uncomfortable. Had he not had his sights set on Hermione, he likely would have been interested in getting to know Elsa better. He decided to shift the conversation to something more innocuous, such as the upcoming Quidditch World Cup tournament. Thankfully it was something on which she was knowledgeable.

Over dessert of crème brûlée, they had a lively discussion about opera. Lucius was a bit unsettled to learn that they shared the same favorite opera *Morgana*. He would have thought she would have preferred one of the Germanic operas. As the conversation wound down and the bill was settled, he said, "It has been a lovely evening, and I look forward to doing business with you, but as I have a full schedule tomorrow, I must take my leave of you."

Elsa did her best to hide her disappointment. She had clearly hoped the celebration would continue after dinner. "Of course. I shall look for your owl."

He rose to his feet and gently took her hand in his. "I look forward to working with you," he said, hoping it sounded professional.

Once outside he walked down the street to the Apparition point, not noticing someone slinking away in the shadows.

A/N: As always my deepest thanks to my beta, beaweasley2. She catches those niggling little errors and has been a great sounding board to keep the plot on track. I'll try to keep updating this at least weekly, but the kiddos are out for summer break and the chapters posted here have no caught up to what has gone through beta, so I do ask for your patience. There is some really good stuff coming up.

Thank you again to everyone who has taken the time to review. It really means a lot to me to know folks are enjoying this story. Virtual cookies for all reviewers.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 29

After much careful consideration, Hermione has determined that divorce the only course of action. Does Ron agree?

Chapter 18

Hermione spent the rest of the week after meeting with Mr. Forsythe alternately buried in her work and trying to find a solicitor in her price range that she felt could handle her case. Unfortunately those seemed to be in short supply. Because divorce was so uncommon, there were not many solicitors who actually had experience. And those who did were uncomfortable with taking her case because there was a chance that the other party would object, not to mention that the two of them were still being lauded as heroes of the war. She knew that Lucius was trying to get her to use Reg, but this was something she wanted to do on her own. She knew there would be questions about why she was using such an expensive high-profile lawyer, that she wasn't prepared to answer.

Actually, she thought there was more than just a chance Ron would contest even though she had not really talked to him since the initial proclamation that she thought they would be better apart. He had sent her flowers with an apologetic note, but she knew it was too little, too late and that the reasons for the separation were irreconcilable as neither of them would relent and give into the other's wishes.

Amazingly, Ron had apparently hadn't told his parents because she had been sure that she would have received a Howler from Molly if he had. She dreaded the reaction from his family the most because they had so readily accepted her, and she hated hurting them.

She was sitting in the lunch room on Thursday, pushing her food around her plate, when Gilles Dumont joined her. He had started work shortly after she had, though he was not in her workgroup. When she had first seen him, she had thought there was something familiar about him, but she did not recognize him from school. It was only when she joined him for lunch one day that she learned they had met when she was on Christmas holidays during her first year of Hogwarts. Her parents had once again taken her on their annual skiing vacation at Les Deux Alpes near Grenoble, France. She hadn't been much for skiing, and he had twisted his ankle, so they had spent some time playing games and chatting in the chalet. Neither of them had realized the other was magical at that time as both came from Muggle families. He had grown into quite the handsome man from the awkward youth of thirteen she had remembered.

After that, they had started to sit with each other during lunch quite frequently. They had a great deal in common as he was also quite bookish, and she enjoyed the opportunity to practice her French. She did use her French when around Fleur and her family, but Ron had never been particularly close to Bill so they generally only saw each other at family gatherings. Of late they had been discussing magical history, especially the period concerning Merlin which Gilles found utterly fascinating as it was not something he had studied much at Beauxbatons.

Gilles set down his fork and angled his head so that she'd look up at him. "Something is bothering you?" he asked once she made eye contact.

Hermione placed both elbows on the table as she put one hand over the one holding her fork. "Oui," she answered in French, indicating she would prefer they not use English.

Understanding her request, he continued the conversation in French. "Do you wish to talk about it?"

She sighed, put down her fork and looked him in the eyes. She did want to talk about it, but it was far more personal than anything else they had discussed at lunch. "I do, but I don't think I should."

He picked up his mug with both hands, his elbows on the table. "Do you not have other friends who can help you?"

She shook her head. "Not with this. I have a very small group of friends, and this concerns one of them."

He lowered his mug to the table. "Well, I am a very good listener, and I would like to think you consider me a friend."

"I do, Gilles, I just... It's very personal. I would love to tell you, I really would, but... I don't know."

He smiled warmly at her. "Consider my offer. If you find you still need someone to talk to, we can talk about it. Until then, I'm sure we can find something else interesting to discuss over lunch."

"Sure," she replied, relieved that he hadn't pushed and feeling better that she'd have someone else to confide in if she'd have wanted to. They spent the rest of the lunch break talking about wizarding life in Renaissance France.

When Hermione returned to work, she was better able to concentrate, finally having gotten her mind off Ron for a while.

On Friday, she still wasn't ready to confide in Gilles, but she did enjoy the distraction provided by sharing the lunch table with him. It was quite refreshing to take a break from discussing all things potions related. That afternoon, she took Lucius' words to heart to not be a recluse and decided to go visit George and Angelina. After work, she headed over to Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes. "Hi, George," she said as cheerfully as she could muster.

He grinned at her and gave her a hug. "Hermione! Good to see you. I've been dying to bounce some new product ideas off of you." He took a good look at her face and saw that she was troubled. "Verity, can you close up tonight?"

"Sure thing, George," she replied cheerfully over her shoulder while stocking trick wands in the bin.

George led Hermione through the storeroom and up the back stairs to his flat. He turned to face her and crossed his arms. "Want to talk about it? Want me to knock some sense into Ron?" he offered, trying to lighten the mood.

"Maybe later," she replied, letting him know this was something she wanted to discuss in private with him.

"No problem. Lina! We have another mouth to feed for dinner!" he shouted towards the kitchen.

"Who is it? I'm elbow deep in feeding Fred," she called from the kitchen.

Hermione and George walked to the kitchen. "Hi, Angelina," Hermione said as she smiled warmly at the sight of Angelina and little Fred covered in something that looked like carrots. "You weren't kidding about being elbow deep, were you?" She watched Fred try to grab the spoon and pull it into his mouth, instead missing and dribbling them down his cheek.

"He's a very artistic eater," Angelina replied. "It's good to see you again."

"Yeah, it's been too long, and I've been too busy. Do you need any help?" Hermione offered.

"I'm almost done with Fred and then you can lend a hand with dinner while George gets Fred cleaned up."

"That sounds great."

While they watched Angelina almost futilely trying to feed little Fred, George said, "The latest Daydream Charm has been a real blockbuster."

"I told you it would be." Hermione still admired the magic that went into that charm even if she didn't fully approve of the fact that it could be used in class. Of course, there were a fair few products that didn't meet her approval, yet she still admired the skill and inventiveness it had taken to create them. There were times she thought George's skills could be used to serve the wizarding community, but then she remembered the power of laughter and happiness and knew that George was where he was doing the most good. "So what's this new product you want to bounce off me? Something to skive class?" she joked, knowing that he never asked her about those sorts of products.

"Would I suggest something like that?" he asked, feigning upset. "No, I'm looking at a new line of customizable trick wands. Trick wands are great, but face it, everyone knows their own wand, so you would never get anyone to unknowingly use a fake one." He leaned forward in his chair. "My idea is to figure out some way that the wand would replicate the *appearance* of another person's wand without the wand losing the trick part of the spell. The buyer would tap the trick wand on their friend's wand and it would Transfigure itself to match. Then they can be switched and hide the real one. This way you could take the Mickey out of your mates when they tried to use the trick wand, thinking it was their own. I could easily do the Transfiguration here at the shop, but that wouldn't be practical if you were trying to swap out someone else's wand, would it? I'm having some problem with the delayed activation of the Transfiguration spell, and I thought you might have some ideas."

She thought about his idea and knew that their trick wands were harmless. "That's really ingenious."

George smiled proudly. "Why thank you. So, any ideas?"

"Nothing comes to mind, but I have some ideas where to look into it. Give me a few days, and I can send you what I come up with by owl."

Angelina set down the bowl and pulled Fred out of his high chair. Holding him at arm's length she offered him to George. "Here you go. All ready for his bath."

George carefully took his carroty son. "You have got to learn to get that spoon in your mouth," he said as he carried Fred out of the kitchen.

Hermione enjoyed helping out in the kitchen, chopping vegetables, and listening to Angelina tell her about Fred's latest antics. After about ten minutes, she could hear George was doing something rather noisy in the living room with little Fred, but Angelina seemed quite oblivious to the commotion. They talked a little bit about what Ron had done this time, but Hermione didn't feel comfortable giving Angelina all the details.

The roast pork Angelina made was excellent as always, and over dinner the conversation had stayed mostly on the topic of product development as George first filled Hermione in on everything he had done so far trying to get the trick wand to function properly. Then the three of them discussed some new ideas for the next round of Daydream Charms.

As Hermione watched the two of them interact, she couldn't help but feel a little jealous about their relationship. They had what she wanted. There was no question the two of them were in love.

After dinner, Hermione asked, "Would it be alright if I talked to George alone?"

Sensing the seriousness of the conversation, Angelina replied, "Sure thing." She took Fred to get him ready for bed.

Knowing their flat was fairly small, Hermione asked if they could go down to the shop and George agreed. They sat on a couple of stools in the storeroom, and George asked seriously, "So, what has Ron done this time?"

She sighed. "That's just it this time. Like Angelina said, 'what else is new'. There always seems to be *this time*, and so many times it's the same thing."

"I know Ron can be a bit thick..." George started, but wasn't sure where to go.

"It's not that he's being thick, it's... more than that. Ron's a great person, but I just don't know how compatible we are. I enjoy his friendship, but what it takes to be a good friend is a lot different from what it takes to be a good husband." She just didn't know how to continue, knowing how Ron and the Potters had reacted.

"So that's why Ron's been over at Harry and Ginny's," George said, filling in the blanks.

"Yeah," she replied quietly. "I just think we would be better apart and able to find someone who truly makes us happy. I see what you and Angelina have together, and Harry and Ginny, and I want that sort of happiness. I just don't have it with Ron, and I don't know that I ever will. We're just too different, and those differences are sometimes... insurmountable."

He gave her a supportive hug. "Oh, Hermione. I'm so sorry. I think we all hoped that Ron would grow up and do right by you," he said sympathetically.

"So you don't blame me?" she asked as she relished his hug. It was nice to know that at least one Weasley would not shun her.

"Every time a relationship falls apart, both sides have to bear some responsibility," George said wisely.

She was always a little surprised when she saw George's serious side. But because he could be so level-headed, despite his outward playful demeanor, she really cherished his friendship. "Thanks for seeing that, though I don't know the same will be said for the rest of your family."

Remembering how Molly had treated Hermione the year of the Triwizard Tournament, he replied, "You're probably right." After a few moments he asked, "So what are you going to do?"

"I need to talk to Ron again, but I just don't see how we can make it work and both be happy. If we stay together, I'm afraid it will only get worse. Some things just can't be reached by compromise, and we'll have strife and resentment and ruin anything we had. We'll be miserable he'll be miserable. And before you ask, I do know how this is going to look and what a circus it's going to turn into." She anticipated that he would warn her how divorce was viewed in the wizarding world.

He looked at her sadly. "How does Ron feel about this?"

"We haven't talked since I mentioned the idea. I was going to see him tomorrow now that he's had time to consider it." She had no idea how that conversation would go, but she could not see it ending well.

"He really does love you," George said.

"I know, and that's what makes this hard. I do love him, but I think we're better as friends. We're just at different places in our lives, and I don't think we will ever be in the same place." As she looked into George's eyes, she could tell that he thought the same thing.

"I just wanted you to know. Amazingly, it doesn't look like Ron has told anyone."

George offered, "He's probably hoping that you will reconsider."

"If that's what he wanted, he sure hasn't done much to convince me he's willing to compromise or to see things my way at all that's not fair. We're at an impasse, and if one

has to give in to what the other wants, that person will not be happy. It will not... bode well. Thanks for letting me talk to you about this," she said as she gave him one last hug. "I'm going to get going. Say goodnight to Angelina and Fred for me."

"Sure," he said sadly. "And no matter what, we'll always be your friends. Just... it's going to be tense for a while, and you know..." he said sheepishly.

She smiled weakly. "I know family comes first. Owl me when it's good," she said, leaving the ball in his court. This was going to be the hardest part about the divorce. She loved all the Weasleys. She and Ron definitely should have waited, talked more about important adult matters before getting married. If they had dated and then decided not to wed, she probably would not have strained her relationship with the family as much as this would.

Returning home, she felt a little better about her decision. George hadn't tried to talk her out of the divorce, realizing that she was doing what was best.

The next morning she was up early and eager to talk to Ron. Well, eager wasn't really the proper term, but she just wanted to get it out of the way. Unfortunately, it was far too early for her to pay the Potters a visit.

After preparing for the day, she decided to go for a walk and see where her feet took her until it was late enough in the morning to pay him a visit. When it hit nine in the morning, she found a secluded place and Apparated to Godric's Hallow.

She knocked on the door and Harry answered. "Good morning, Harry," she said. "Is Ron around?"

"Yeah, he's in the kitchen. Come on in." Harry indicated she should wait in the living room.

It didn't take long for Ron to join her. She smiled wanly.

"Morning," Ron said quietly and took a seat in the chair. There was a very awkward silence. "So, you haven't changed your mind?" he finally asked.

She sighed. "No. I haven't. I just don't think we are good as a married couple since we don't want the same things. Surely you have to have seen that, and I'm not just talking about kids it's everything."

"I know it hasn't always been good between us..." Ron defended.

"When *has* it been really good between us? We either seem to argue or to go off and do our own things," she pointed out.

He looked defeated. "I know that, but think of the family..."

"Ron, that's the last thing we should be thinking about. We should think about ourselves. Do you want to live a miserable life where we each resent the other? I know I don't." She just had to get through to him.

"You say that now, but you don't know how bad divorce is in the wizarding world. It's been ages since there was one," Ron protested.

She rebutted, "That's a bit of an exaggeration. The last high profile divorce happened in 1985."

"But that proves my point it's just not common!" he said defensively.

Hermione quickly cast the Muffliato, knowing that there was a good chance this would end in a shouting match. "I know it's not common, but if we agree to do this, it can be done quietly with a minimal amount of fuss by anyone, especially the press. Then we can both easily move on with our lives."

"Is that what you are doing already? I know that you haven't been at home this week," he asked accusatorially. "Did you find someone new?"

She tried to hide her shock that Ron was accusing her of seeing someone else, thinking that she would have been looking for someone else, and apparently spying on her. "No, I'm not seeing anyone. I do not have another wizard in my life. I just... there are too many memories at home, and I want to be out around people. Well, truthfully, I've been at the library if you must know. I find solace in books you know that." That was mostly the truth and was where she had been spending most of her time in the evenings. Lucius was nothing more than a friend, and that friendship had no bearing on the collapse of their marriage. "And I went to see George and Angelina last night and I told George," she admitted.

Ron jumped to his feet. "You told my brother?" he shouted.

"You told Harry and Ginny," she retorted.

"But George is *my* brother, not yours," he said angrily.

She knew that this was not an argument that she was going to win. "Fine. So I told George. He's not going to tell your folks or anyone else. I needed to talk to someone about this, and my closest friends are also your family." She did feel a bit guilty hiding her friendship with Lucius, but given how Ron was prone to overreacting, she knew that was something it was best he didn't know.

Ron crossed his arms. "And he couldn't talk you out of it?"

"He just listened. He didn't try to tell me anything, but he understood. However, he doesn't want to take sides. But aside from that, I want you to give me a really good reason why we shouldn't do this and the wizarding view on divorce doesn't count." She crossed her arms defensively and waited for his reply.

Ron opened and closed his mouth a few times as he tried to tell her a reason. "Because I love you," he finally replied quietly.

"I love you, too, but we can do this and still be friends. I think we're really good as friends, but I don't think that we're meant to be more than that. I want you to be happy, Ron, and we just aren't in the same place. We want different things out of life." She leaned forward and took hold of his hands. "I want you to find the witch I know you deserve, that I know will make you happy," she said sincerely. "Please, Ron, look in your heart and find the truth."

He sighed. "All right," he said quietly. "I hate being a failure."

"You aren't a failure. Neither of us are a failure," she reassured him. "We were just young, perhaps too young, and we didn't sit down and ask the big questions or know what questions to ask. I think we were both caught up in the moment when the war was over and rushed into marriage because everyone expected it of us. We didn't really talk things out, discover what we wanted out of life. Our whole relationship was intertwined with Voldemort, Death Eaters, survival, *Harry's survival*, and the rebound after affects from the war... We never had a normal dating relationship where we got to know us Us. As individuals."

"Maybe. But I really thought you were the one," he said, tears welling in his eyes.

She looked at him sadly. "I thought the same thing. After everything we'd been through, I thought it was enough, but it isn't, not for a marriage. I'll always love you, but I can't see us working out as a couple. Better to find out now than to live in misery for the rest of our lives, don't you think? We're still young, and there is plenty of time for us to find someone we are better matched with."

"Yeah, I guess," he reluctantly admitted as he slumped back on the sofa.

After a long pause, she asked, "Do you think you can get off work for a couple of hours on Monday?"

"I guess there isn't any point in putting this off, is there?"

She shook her head. "No, not really."

"I'll see what I can do, but I can't promise anything. Maybe later in the week."

"Tell you what, I can take care of the initial paperwork and bring it over for you to look at. You'll still have to see the solicitor to sign it." She was relieved that she had gotten him to see things her way, and it looked like this could be done with minimal fuss.

"Sure," he replied, no longer meeting her eyes.

"I won't fight you for anything. I just want my clothes and my books and my potions kit. You can have anything else or none of it, just... I just want this to be as painless as possible," she said quietly.

"Yeah," he said in a near whisper, still refusing to look at her. "I think you should go now."

"Sure. I'll come over when I have the paperwork." She stood up and looked back at him before leaving the room. "I'm sorry, Ron. I really am. If it's any consolation, you're not a failure neither of us are. We're just better off as friends than husband and wife. I know you'll find someone perfect for you. You're a good and decent man."

She left without saying goodbye to Harry or Ginny and went home to cry. No matter what she told Ron, she thought she was a failure. She was bright enough that she should have thought about all things they might have in common and things they might feel differently enough about to make them incompatible. But she really hadn't had any experience in being in a serious relationship, and she had never thought to turn to books, blindly believing what everyone was saying at the time, and sure that she had known what was best.

Monday was a busy day for Hermione. She somehow had to hopefully fit in a whole day's worth of work and a trip to the solicitor's office. She had no idea how long that might take, but she was confident that she could do so without it impacting her work, since there was a lot of dead time in her current project.

Amazingly, she was able to get in to see the solicitor that afternoon. And even more amazingly, it took less than an hour. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. A part of her felt that something that momentous should have taken longer than it did, but at the same time, it was an ugly bit of business, and she did not want to linger over it any longer than necessary.

She tucked the parchment safely into her pocket before returning to work. After work, she debated on waiting until later when Ron was sure to be there and going now when he might be there. She finally decided that the sooner she handed it over, the better.

She knocked on the door to Harry and Ginny's house. After several very long seconds, Ginny opened the door. "Hermione," she said with a false smile.

"Hi, Ginny. Is Ron in?"

"No. He and Harry are still at work," she said rather brusquely.

She pulled the envelope out of her pocket and handed it to Ginny. "Will you see that Ron gets this?"

Ginny acted as though the letter was coated in poison when she took it tentatively in her hand. "Wouldn't you rather give it to him directly? Talk it over some more?" she asked hopefully.

Hermione shook her head. "There really isn't anything else to talk about. We've been trying for months, and we're at an impasse. This is for the best. Please, just see that he gets it," Hermione said sadly before leaving. She really wanted nothing more than to spend time with Ginny, but she just couldn't bear another confrontation with Ron right now. "If he has questions, I'll be at home tonight," Hermione said and then walked through the gate to Disapparate home.

Once there she checked the pantry and saw that she would have to go to the market tomorrow. She sighed and resigned herself to a simple dinner. For the first time in her life, she wished she had spent more time making friends. Her friends were basically Ron's family. There was Gilles and Anastasia in her department, but they were just work friends, and she didn't think they knew each other well enough for her to share this sort of personal information with him. Of course, she was considering writing Lucius, and she hadn't really known him much longer than Gilles, but she reasoned they had different sort of friendship. Theirs was more personal and less professional. Besides, she didn't want to disturb Lucius on such short notice. She had started to write him two letters, but had ended up discarding them. She just was not sure that he was a good enough friend to burden with this sort of personal problem. Not to mention the bad blood between the Malfoy and Weasley families.

After deciding not to write Lucius, she flicked on the Wireless. Unsurprisingly she was assaulted with the Chudley Cannons game, and she immediately changed the channel. The next station was 'Cooking with Cassie', a show that always made her feel inadequate, particularly considering the simple fare she usually prepared for her meals, and she tried another channel. Finally she decided that 'Quinton's Wiz Quiz' was innocuous enough to have on as background noise and decided to drown her sorrows in a box of chocolates, but found it utterly unfulfilling. She flipped off the Wireless and tried to read a book, but found that she could not concentrate, and she casually tossed the book aside and started pacing, trying to find something to keep her mind off the mess that her personal life had become.

For a brief moment she thought about going to her parents' house so she could mindlessly flip through channels on the telly, but she knew that would do nothing to improve her mood and would only lead to her parents asking her questions that she was not prepared to answer.

She decided that rather than wallow in pity and try to pretend that she was not miserable, she really needed someone to talk to and there was really only one person.

Sitting down at her desk, she tapped the quill to her lips and stared at the empty paper. While it should not be difficult to write a letter, she found herself not even sure of how to start. She first wrote 'Dear Lucius' and then hastily scribbled it out. That sounded far too personal. Of course she was asking him a rather personal favor, and it was not as though they were strangers, but it still sounded a bit too friendly to her.

She scribbled a few more lines on the parchment before crossing them out as well. She did not want to come across as too needy or desperate, but she also wanted to let him know that she really did need someone to talk to. Finally she thought she had the perfect wording and transferred it to a clean sheet of parchment.

Lucius,

I was wondering if you would have time one evening to chat? I'd like the company.

Hermione

That surprisingly short note, took her more than a quarter of an hour to write. She knew that he had offered to let her bend his ear, but it still felt odd asking.

"Pig, I've got a delivery for you," she said to the miniscule little owl. She was glad she had kept the note short.

The owl fluttered around her and hooted eagerly before she snatched him out of the air. She was surprised that Ron hadn't taken him. Once she got the note attached to his leg, she said, "I want you to take this to Mr. Malfoy at his manor in Wiltshire and deliver it at breakfast. Don't wake him up in the middle of the night, okay?"

The owl hooted happily about having a delivery to make.

"Then I want you to go Ron at Harry's. You belong to him." She released the little owl, who flew around her once before flying out the open window. She sighed as she watched Pig leave and then decided it was time to turn in. Either Ron had no questions or he hadn't finished reading through the documents.

The petition had been very straightforward. It outlined the reasons for wanting divorce and listed the few possessions Hermione wanted: her clothes, her books, the things she'd kept from her childhood and her Gran Nan's tea pot, and, of course, her part of the savings. She thought it was more than fair.

As she lay in bed, she realized that all of their furnishings were Ron's possessions. The exception being a small, antique oak Welsh cupboard Ron had bought her at an outdoor market and her bookshelf in the living room. She hadn't shown any interest in picking furniture, nor in actually choosing their flat. Those were the types of things that she just did not find important.

Tomorrow she would send Ron an owl letting him know that she was going to find a new place to live and that he could have the flat or terminate the lease as he saw fit. If she was going to start a new chapter in her life, she had to do it from a new place to live.

Now that she had begun the process, she found it liberating and slept better than she had since leaving the Bahamas.

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Chapter 19

Chapter 19 of 29

Lucius continues to juggle the many events in his life and after nearly twenty years, finally sees his sister.

Chapter 19

When Lucius arrived at breakfast, he saw a letter from Hermione waiting for him. Ignoring the rest of his morning post for the moment, he opened hers, feeling a sense of pleasing titillation course through him he hadn't felt in years. It was actually more of a note than a letter, simply asking him if he had time to get together. The tone and brevity was such that it was hard to decipher her reason for meeting, although he could surmise she needed to see him regarding pursuing her divorce from her husband, or perhaps the young man was giving her grief. No, the writing of the note looked unhurried and precise, not as would be expected if she were upset. She had clearly spent a great deal of time crafting this brief missive, possibly because she was unsure about the state of their friendship.

He set the note by his plate. This was a very busy week for him, but he would find time to spend with her since he knew that there was really no one else she could confide in. Besides, he had to continue to cultivate their relationship.

He was already planning on visiting Delilah this afternoon since most of the day Wednesday would be spent in Frankfurt as he assisted Elsa with the process of replacing her management team, and then late that afternoon he had a meeting scheduled with Reg and Jackson Davies, his Personnel Manager, to discuss the details involving several of his senior managers whose contracts were up for renegotiation. It was possible that meeting would last long into the evening, and the last thing he wanted to do was have her sitting around waiting for him, getting frustrated that he was running late. It appeared that Thursday would be his first opportunity to get together with Hermione.

He felt a little guilty about having to put Hermione off until Thursday, but he did have other obligations. He was sure that she would understand. After breakfast he would pen a reply and have it sent to her at work. As far as he knew, her husband was still staying with the Potters, but he did not want to take any chances of the wrong person seeing his letter to Hermione. His life had suddenly gone from quiet and simple to overly complicated. Of course he was bringing all of this on himself by not being forthright with Elsa.

Dinner last night had been quite tedious. Even though he had tried to moderate his behavior so that Elsa would have no reason to think he was flirting with her, it had seemed to make little difference in her demeanor. He was afraid that precedence had been set and dissuading her attentions would take some careful maneuvering so as to not completely vex the woman. He would be relieved when he was satisfied with the management and procedures at the Kesselwerks and it would no longer require his close involvement. For now he would just have to do his best to keep the relationship as professional as possible. He no longer had to remain in her good favor as much as he had before the acquisition, but he didn't want to make her feel scorned either. That was a headache he didn't need.

Lucius turned his attention to his remaining post and saw nothing else that couldn't be dealt with later. For now he had other business to attend. He was looking to continue his international expansion and had his research department looking for complimentary companies that were in a bit of financial trouble. They had a report due to him this morning, and he knew that reviewing it would occupy a good portion of his morning. There would of course be the slew of standard reports from his domestic holdings, and he had a one o'clock meeting with the Ministry. While he wasn't technically on any sort of probation at this point, they seemed to feel it necessary to examine his business transactions in excruciating detail periodically. In five years there had never been anything suspicious, yet they still insisted on these meetings.

Not that he had any interest in doing anything illegal, but if he did, it would be highly unlikely that anyone at the Ministry would uncover it. He had already learned his lesson about being careless.

With breakfast finished, he stopped in his study to pen a quick reply to Hermione letting her know that he would come by the lab on Thursday and then went to his office to begin his day.

It was shortly after three by the time he finished with the Ministry. He thought of leaving directly from there, but he felt he would be overdressed since Delilah lived on a farm. He still had a hard time imagining his prim sister as a farmer, but every indication from her letters was that she was happy. Once home he changed into something more casual than his usual bespoke robes, something that he hoped her family would find less intimidating. He then walked down to the wine cellar to select a suitable wine as a gift. It took him fifteen minutes, but he was quite pleased with his selection. It was a thirty year Barolo that he was sure would be superb.

Returning to the foyer, he prepared for long-distance Apparition. Delilah's home near Genoa was too far to go straight there, so he would have to stop in Lyon for a short while to recover. The distance was slightly more than traveling to Frankfurt, but it was still within his capabilities, if just barely. Even with the stop in Lyon, it would still be late afternoon by the time he arrived, giving him plenty of time with his sister and her family.

When he arrived in Lyon, it took him a few moments to overcome his disorientation. He then perused the shops and decided to pick up a few small trinkets for his nieces and a lovely scarf for his sister while he recovered from the effects of long-distance Apparition. Thankfully the distance from Lyon to Genoa was shorter than Wiltshire to Lyon and would not be so taxing.

By the time the necklaces were wrapped and paid for, he felt up to finishing his journey. He Apparated to the muddy road where their farm was located. It had clearly rained recently, but checking the skies, it looked as though it would be a clear evening. He proceeded down the lane and turned up the drive, slightly nervous about seeing his sister for the first time in nearly twenty years, wondering what sort of reception he would receive.

He was halfway to the farmhouse when the door opened. For a moment Delilah stood frozen in the doorway, hand covering her mouth, as though she could not believe what she was seeing. As he continued to move closer, her trance was finally broken, and she started walking towards him. Life on the farm had changed her: her skin was tanned and lined from work outside, and he could see the silver glint in her blonde hair, but she still looked very much as he remembered. He couldn't help grinning broadly at the pure joy he could see reflected in his sister's eyes. He held his arms open as she neared, and they wrapped each other in a warm embrace. As she held him tightly, he could feel her crying and fought back his own tears. How could he have waited so long to reach out to her? How could he have inflicted this much pain upon them both? She had been his closest friend growing up and yet he had so easily abandoned her when his father had commanded it.

"It's so wonderful to see you," he said quietly, not quite trusting his voice.

"I never thought I would see you again," she replied as she broke the embrace.

He handed her his handkerchief, and she dabbed her eyes. "You look beautiful."

"Flatterer. I'm a mess." She fussed with her hair. "It was a long day in the fields. But look at you. You've hardly changed. Though you did let your hair grow." She touched the long strands flowing loose at his shoulders, and then laid a hand on his chest as if to assure herself that he was really standing in front of her.

"My one form of protest. He detested long hair," Lucius said, referring to their father.

"Yet you kept it after he died?" she asked curiously.

"I rather like the way it looks. And so did Narcissa."

"I'm so sorry to hear of her passing. She was a lovely woman, and I enjoyed being able to spend time with her."

He knew that Delilah's visits with Narcissa had been a welcome respite from her tyrant of a husband. "Thank you. Now, where is this family of yours? I imagine you told them to wait inside."

"I did. I wanted you to myself for a few minutes. After all the ugliness with You-Know-Who, I wasn't sure I would ever see you again. I was afraid I would lose you before we could reconcile." She wrapped her arms around him again, as if to assure herself that he was really standing in front of her.

"Thankfully, you did not. Narcissa saved us all. And I must apologize for not reaching out sooner. As soon as he died, I should have sent you a letter not waited another decade to do so. I'm so sorry." Once again, he found himself fighting back the tears that threatened to erupt.

She released him. "Well, you've righted that wrong now, and there's nothing to be served by dwelling on the past. Why don't you come inside and meet the family. The girls speak excellent English, but Vittorio will likely use a mix of Italian and English."

"I'm sure we'll manage." Lucius let his sister lead him into the house. It was a cozy stucco farmhouse that definitely felt like a home. He could see his sister's touches everywhere and was glad that she had found happiness. His nieces were in the kitchen preparing vegetables under their father's supervision, and both turned to stare at him when Lucius entered the modest farmhouse. The older girl, who he assumed was Gianna, resembled her father with her wavy brown hair and green eyes, but the other girl, he assumed was Lucia, looked exactly as her mother had at fifteen. He was definitely glad that he had changed into something more casual; his usual attire would have been quite out of place here.

Delilah introduced him to Vittorio and the girls. Lucius presented Delilah and each of the girls with their gifts and they seemed quite pleased at the necklaces, gushing over how beautiful they were. He then placed the bottle of wine on the table. "I thought I'd provide the wine for tonight."

Vittorio looked at the wine and then picked up the bottle to examine the label more closely. "Mama mia!" he exclaimed. He then held the bottle for Delilah to read.

"Lucius, this is far too much," she protested as she saw how old the wine was and what variety.

He waved off their concern. "Consider it a very belated wedding gift and twenty years' worth of Christmas gifts. Now, we should decant it before dinner so it has time to breathe."

Delilah brought him a wine decanter and with a flick of his wand, he sufficiently widened the base of the decanter so the wine could breathe properly. As he gently poured the wine, he observed that the color and nose were perfect. This would indeed be a wonderful wine to share. Once the wine was poured, he cast a cooling charm to hold it at the proper temperature. "That should be ready in time for dinner."

While dinner preparations were in progress, Vittorio opened a bottle of Chianti for them to share. He then proudly told Lucius all about his farm, and it wasn't long before Lucius found himself on the receiving end of a tour. Delilah came along and elaborated on Vittorio's explanations when necessary, but they two men were doing well in their mix of Italian and English. Their farm was quite successful for its size, and Vittorio was very proud of it.

When it was nearly time for dinner, Vittorio left to cook the meat on the grill. Lucius turned to Delilah. "He has no idea about our family, does he?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Why should he? When we met, I had been cut off, and it's never come up in conversation."

"I suggest you tell him before you make any visits," he said, knowing that the manor would likely be a shock to Vittorio.

"I don't know that we'll be visiting," she said softly.

He could hear the sadness in her voice. He placed his hand on her shoulder. "It's been twenty years. I would love to have you visit, and you can see Draco again and meet his family."

"What does he think of all this?" she asked.

"I've not actually told him yet," he admitted somewhat sheepishly. "I wanted to make sure our relationship was healed before I brought it up with him."

"Oh." There was a long pause before she asked, "Why now? Why after twenty years?"

Lucius considered his words carefully. "No good reason. I was more concerned with my own needs and business concerns and could not be troubled with anything else."

She could tell he was hiding something. "Lucius," she prompted.

Even after all this time, she still knew when he was being evasive. He placed his hand on her arm. "After dinner. It's too complicated to explain now."

During dinner he enjoyed the conversation with his newfound family. His nieces were more than happy to tell him all about their school and what courses they were taking. Gianna excelled at Potions and hoped to apprentice with a renowned Potions Master in Milan when she finished her studies next spring. Lucia preferred Charms and enjoyed helping out around the farm and trying to devise better ways of accomplishing her chores and told him about how she was researching ways to make the farm more efficient. The adults had enjoyed the Barolo over dinner, the girls were even allowed a small measure of this very fine wine, and Vittorio had told him on no less than four occasions how marvelous the wine was and how Lucius had not had to go through the trouble and expense. Lucius had insisted that it was the least he could do after

the years of estrangement. He remained evasive about the nature of his work and family fortune. When Delilah was ready, she could tell her family.

When dinner was over, Vittorio and the girls retired inside, leaving Lucius and Delilah to talk.

"Now, what was the real reason you finally reached out to me?" she asked as she poured grappa for the two of them.

Lucius took a sip of his drink and admired the sunset a few moments before answering. "I had my eyes opened to how foolish I have been." He paused. "There is a witch, who is very special to me. She is ending her marriage, and it made me realize how wrong it was to ostracize you when I am considering a romantic future with her."

She gave him a suspicious look. "You didn't have anything to do with that, did you?"

"You dare insinuate that I would break up a marriage? I assure you, that marriage was broken long before she and I met." That wasn't strictly true as they had known of each other for a long time, but they had not been on friendly terms until just recently.

"But did she realize that it was broken?" Delilah asked probingly.

"Their unhappiness was obvious. The fact that she chose to act on her feelings after meeting me is not relevant." He was not about to tell her the entire truth that he did go out of his way to show her what she could have with someone other than Weasley. "And does it really matter? She is married to someone who does not deserve her, does not appreciate her. I have no doubt they will both be happier apart."

Delilah arched an eyebrow at him, indicating she did not entirely believe he was blameless.

"Don't give me that look. I have done nothing untoward. It was she who first brought up the subject of divorce. I have been a friend and a confidant to her, provided her some advice about dealing with perceptions. Nothing more."

"You always were the shrewd one," she finally said, a slight undertone in her voice indicating she did not believe his professed innocence.

"I had to be to survive in that household." He drained his drink and refilled his glass. "I really hate to say it, but it was a happy day when he died." While he had a few good memories of his father, they were far outweighed by the negative.

"You know I have no love lost for him. He could have supported me, made it so that I would not have had to leave the country." She waited several long seconds before asking, "Does she know how you feel about her?"

"I don't know. Aside from my extension of friendship..." He considered his drink a few seconds, "As you can imagine, I need to keep our relationship platonic. I have kept my feelings in reserve for now. Her needs must be considered foremost presently."

"Yet you think she feels something for you? Are you sure you aren't just seeing what you want? After all, it's been five years. The loneliness..."

He had seen how Hermione's demeanor changed when they spent time together. She seemed to come alive and her eyes lit up each time they met except when she'd been truly troubled. But her smile had always seemed welcoming and sincere. "That is something to be determined once I can court her, isn't it? And I do think it is best if we keep this just between the two of us," he replied. To change the subject, "Now, something I've been meaning to ask you, your choice of Lucia's name?" he asked, arching his eyebrow.

Delilah blushed. "She was so fair when she was born compared to her sister and there was something about her demeanor that just reminded me of you, I thought it fitting to name her after my beloved brother, even if he wasn't speaking to me. It's also quite coincidentally Vittorio's grandmother's name. It really does suit her, though. Her ambition really does remind me of you. She can't wait to finish school and be able to devote her time to improving the farm."

"And I'm sure she will do a wonderful job," he replied, remembering Lucia's enthusiasm during dinner. "Now surely I can entice you to visit? I'm sure that Draco would be happy to see you again. And you would love meeting Astoria and Scorpius."

She hesitated before replying. "Why don't we wait and see what happens with this upcoming divorce?"

He placed his hand on hers. "Delilah, we could keep your visit secret. It would just be family."

She shook her head. "I'm not ready, yet. I know he's gone, and I can see you've changed, but going back..."

Lucius smiled sadly. He had known that life would not return to what it had once been and that it would take time to repair all the damage years of neglect had done to their relationship. "I understand. I'll let Draco know that we've been corresponding and perhaps we can arrange a time for all of us to visit you."

"I think I'd like that," she replied. "It's not you, Lucius, it's just that I've been gone for so long and this is home now." She gestured at the fields.

"Well, I'd like you to consider it a standing offer for when you are ready. I assure you, it is nothing like it was when he was alive. Recent events... Well, after what happened, the manor has undergone a complete renovation for several reasons."

They were both quiet for several minutes. Finally, Delilah spoke. "With that... We got some news about it here. I know some of what happened the first time, and I saw that you spent some time in prison..."

Lucius really did not like to dwell on that period of his life, but he had known that she would ask. "Due to my decisions during his first rise to power, I had no choice when he returned. Well, I technically had a choice, but that choice would have been death and the death of Narcissa and Draco. Prison... I think that is what saved us all. Narcissa did what she had to in order to keep our family whole. She protected Draco, saved us." He had no desire to dwell on the fact that while he had no longer been in prison at the end, that he had still been very much a prisoner and powerless to do anything to protect his family.

"And that is what is important: that you survived." She could see that this conversation made him uncomfortable. "Even though it took far too long, my brother is finally returned to me."

To change the subject, he said, "I will admit I was quite surprised when I learned what had become of you."

She laughed softly. "It wasn't an easy transition, but Vittorio is a wonderful and extremely persistent man. I was working at an apothecary in Genoa where he was a regular customer. Eventually he convinced me to have dinner, and we married six months later. It wasn't easy adjusting to farm life after growing up in a privileged household, but I wouldn't trade it for all the champagne and caviar in the world."

"I'm glad that you have found happiness." While he doubted he could find happiness leading this simple life, he knew that Delilah was exactly where she belonged.

The two of them continued to talk late into the night, telling stories about their children, reminiscing about the happier moments of their childhood. When Lucius returned home, he fell into an exhausted sleep.

By Thursday evening, Lucius was feeling both mentally and physically exhausted. Three days of long-distance Apparition were taking their toll. He had found himself having to return to Frankfurt that morning. Yes, he could have used the Floo, but he prided himself on being a powerful enough wizard to be capable of long-distance Apparition. Hopefully once the new management team was installed, he would have less direct involvement. While Elsa had not overtly flirted with him, she had still made her interest in him quite clear while utterly ignoring his disinterest in her.

Checking the time, he saw that it was nearly six. With a wave of his wand, he tidied his desk and Disapparated to the Potions Research Laboratory. Unsurprisingly, the only light was coming from the lab where Hermione's team worked. He smiled when he saw her bent over her notes. While she was facing the door this time, she was so absorbed in her work that she had not noticed his arrival. "I hear that you could use a friend to talk to," he said as he walked into the lab and took the stool across from her.

She set down her quill. "That I could, though I am sorry to impose on you like this."

"It's not an imposition. It's what a friend does. If you prefer, we could relax over dinner," he offered.

"I'd like that, if it's not too much to ask," she added quickly. "You look tired."

He waved off her concern. While a part of him wanted nothing more than to go home and fall fast asleep, he knew that she needed his friendship right now. "It's nothing. Just a few long days, and since we both should eat dinner, why not enjoy it together?"

"Sure." She quickly cleaned up her work area before allowing Lucius to Apparate them to his club.

Once they were seated and had ordered, she said, "Thanks for making time for me."

"Think nothing of it. I know that you are going through a difficult period." He would do his best to put her at ease and allow her to have a relaxing evening.

"I think that's a bit of an understatement." She looked down at her hands in her lap. "It's just been so hard. I feel like such a failure."

"Hermione, a marriage does not fall apart because one person is to blame," he said, hoping to boost her confidence.

"I know, but I just wish that we had waited, really gotten to know each other without all the life and death, on the run and... Well, then after the war... the expectations. We never spent any time together, just the two of us. We never talked about the important things, what we wanted, really wanted and expected. It's just... I think that I should have known better," she admitted quietly, sounding utterly deflated.

"Over the years, I have learned that I am not as all knowing as I once thought I was." Yes, he had learned this the hard way. "Everyone makes mistakes in life. Sometimes they are small ones, and sometimes they are large ones. Unfortunately, you rarely know you are making one in the moment, and it can take some time before you are finally able to admit it." That was one thing about his incarceration in Azkaban he had had plenty of time to think. He had had time to think about his mistakes of the past, what sort of person he had become and what sort of person he wanted to be. He had found that he had not cared much for the type of person he had become. Once he was truly free, he had gone about remaking himself into a better person, one worthy of respect and not just fear.

"That's very wise. And I think that's part of the problem. I don't think Ron has let it sink in that it was a mistake. I delivered the divorce papers to him on Monday, but I still haven't heard anything back from him." She swirled the wine in her glass, watching the red liquid change colors as it rose higher in the glass.

"I'm sure that he is merely taking his time. After all, this was not a decision you made rashly." Actually, Lucius suspected that Weasley was plotting something. "What has your solicitor said?" He still wished that she would agree to use Reg's services, but now was not the time to push her on that. She was far too independent to accept what she would see as his charity.

She sighed, leaned back in her chair, and took a sip of her wine. "To be patient. He says that this is not the sort of thing that can be rushed."

"And he would be correct. Give it a few more days, and if you haven't heard anything by Monday, there may be other avenues you can pursue." He knew that she could file it as a contested divorce without Weasley's signature on the petition, but it would be much preferred if Weasley would sign.

Their dinner arrived, and she picked half-heartedly at her fish. "I just feel so alone. I've never really had a lot of friends except for Ron, Harry and Ginny, and by association Ron's family. Even the people in our DA group stopped talking to me after the war. I've just never had much in common with witches my own age. I really do hate to burden you with all this given how busy you are."

He wanted her to know that he was there for her. "I understand your loneliness. After all, why else would we have run into each other in the library?" He smiled at her.

She laughed at his joke. "I suppose that's true, but clearly you have been having quite a busy week. I can see it in your face."

"Part and parcel of doing business. When there is something momentous happening, I can be quite busy, but there are other times when everything seems to run itself quite smoothly, and I am left with very little to do. Obviously with my latest acquisition, I find myself quite busy." He was pleasantly surprised by the concern she was showing him.

"Yes, quite," she replied shortly.

He could tell that she wanted to say more, but clearly believed that would be crossing a line. Noting that the conversation was stalling, he changed topics. "I don't know if you've seen it, but Filmore Stevens has recently released a new book on Merlin, and I found some of his conclusions quite controversial."

That was exactly the opening he had needed to start a lively debate. She was a fan of Stevens' theories because he was not afraid of taking Muggle historical information into account since he came from a half-blood family. Of course, by incorporating the Muggle view, it had the effect of making his viewpoints less popular in established wizarding academic circles.

By the time desert was completed, Hermione was looking much less downtrodden. "Please, don't hesitate to owl me if you need someone to talk to again. Don't let the loneliness consume you," he pleaded, having let it do that to him for far too long.

"I'll let you know if I hear from Ron. Perhaps you can run into me at the library one night?" she teased.

He smiled at her. "Perhaps I shall," he replied, knowing he would take her up on the offer.

She rose to her feet and he followed suit. "Please, allow me to show you out."

"Thanks, but I think I can find my way," she replied, unaccustomed to his refined, old-world manners.

It was something he would have to see she become comfortable with: one, it would cement in her mind how uncouth the Weasley boy was, and two, when the time came to court her, she'd know how a true gentleman treated the women he loved. "As a gentleman, I must insist." Noticing her continued discomfort, he added, "Besides, I should be returning home as well."

Once in the foyer, she turned to face him. "See you around."

"Until next time," he replied as he bowed his head slightly. He watched her Disapparate, noting the efficiency and economy of her action. She was truly a gifted witch.

After Lucius returned home, he retired to his study and poured himself two fingers of Scotch as he tried to determine what Weasley was plotting. He was sure that it would be nothing good. She had said that Weasley was in denial that their marriage was indeed over. More likely it was not denial, but a refusal to put his family through the scandal that would come from divorce. Perhaps he would run into her at the library tomorrow and strongly suggest that she take advantage of Reg's considerable knowledge of wizarding law. He knew she was concerned about the cost, but in reality there was nothing to be considered since he was Reg's sole client. Of course, that was not something he wanted her to know.

He wanted nothing more than for this situation to resolve itself as quickly as possible something that was not likely to happen with her current solicitor who was clearly

overwhelmed by the magnitude of this case.

Downing the rest of his Scotch, he decided there was nothing more to be done at the moment and retired for the night.

The following morning was a beautifully sunny late summer day, and Lucius opened his balcony doors before beginning his morning routine, the same routine he had carried out for the last three years: thirty minutes to conduct his morning calisthenics, followed by a leisurely shower before dressing for the day, and breakfast to prepare for the day. His preferred physical conditioning discipline exercised both mind and body.

Once his calisthenics were completed, he enjoyed a tepid glass of water while he stood on the balcony. One of the peacocks was walking through the garden. Lucius lamented this time of year when the poor birds were not in their full majesty due to their annual molting. While still striking white, they weren't quite as majestic without their trains. It was nearly time to bring them in for the winter, and come spring they would have their fantastic plumage returned. He couldn't wait for Hermione to see the manor in spring. It was always his favorite time of the year when the land came back to life.

Of course, there were quite a few steps before that would happen. First and foremost was securing the divorce. He would run into her and once again gently suggest that she should take advantage of Reg's considerable legal knowledge and skills.

As the bird strode out of view, Lucius decided it was time to shower and dress. Once he was perfectly groomed, he headed downstairs for breakfast. It would have been just as easy to take breakfast en suite, but he had always eaten breakfast downstairs, and he would continue to do so.

As he expected the paper was waiting at the table for him. He sat and poured out his tea, splashing a bit of milk in it. He then opened the paper to check the day's news and nearly dropped his tea cup at what he saw on the front page. He knew that he had to see Hermione immediately.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 of 29

Hermione's world gets turned upside down after reading the Friday issue of *Daily Prophet*.

Chapter 20 Ron gets ugly

Dinner with Lucius on Thursday had been a nice respite from her evenings of working late and then going to the library. It had been cathartic to talk to someone about what was going on with Ron and the divorce, but even more therapeutic had been the debate over Filmore Stevens' theories. She thought she had even convinced Lucius to give Stevens' theories a second look, something she would have thought impossible a few months ago. She smiled at the thought of Lucius Malfoy giving a half-blood's Muggle based theories serious consideration.

Hermione forced her thoughts back to Ron. Last night she had decided that if she didn't hear from Ron today, that she would go over and visit him tomorrow so they could discuss the documents. In her mind, it was all rather straightforward, and she had a hard time believing that even he needed this long to go through everything.

She heard the familiar tapping at the window that indicated the owl delivering of the Daily Prophet had arrived. After paying the owl and taking the paper, she dropped it on the table while she made her tea.

When she picked up the paper and flipped it open, she dropped her tea cup, mortified by what she saw as she stared at the front page in horror. Aside from the fact it was one of the most unflattering pictures of her she had ever seen, the headline proclaimed, 'War Heroine Defies Wizarding World and Demands Divorce!' The sub-heading read, 'She feels that motherhood and raising the next generation is beneath her.'

Hermione didn't have to read the byline to know who the author was, but her eyes were drawn to the name all the same. Only one person could write something that sensational. Hermione seethed as she read the article. Ron had aired all her dirty laundry, doing everything he could to make himself look like the victim. She still couldn't believe he had gone to Rita Skeeter. She thought of outing the woman as an undocumented Animagus, but something told her Ron had used his influence the Ministry to cut a deal with her so that Hermione could not hold that over her.

She threw the paper to the floor before she finished the article and incinerated the paper. She now dreaded going to work and penned two letters: one to work requesting the day off so that her presence was not disruptive to the company and the second to her solicitor asking what he recommended for damage control. She then disguised her appearance and went to the nearest Owl Post Office to send the letters. She was beginning to think that she might want to actually look into getting her own owl. Maybe this weekend.

Then she returned home to wait.

It wasn't long before there was a knock at her door. "Who is it?" she asked tentatively, almost afraid to touch the latch. She knew that her flat was warded against intruders, but she wouldn't have put it past Ron to let people know where she lived.

"Lucius. May I come in?" came his muffled voice.

She threw the door open and pulled him into the flat. "What are you doing here?" she asked as she checked to make sure that no one was skulking around.

"I saw the paper this morning and thought that you might want someone to talk to. How are you?" he asked, clearly concerned about her well-being.

"Outraged! I can't believe he would do that," Hermione said as she paced restlessly.

"It is childish, but he is doing that to protect his reputation. By laying the blame on you... Well, it makes him look like the victim," he replied. "I did warn you that wizarding divorce tended to get quite brutal."

"But that..." She pointed at the pile of ash on her kitchen floor. "And to use Rita Skeeter of all witches!" She shook in anger.

Lucius gently took her arms in his hands. "She is the perfect person for this. I've not told you this before, but the last news worthy wizarding divorce, the one I told you turned vicious, that was my sister. In the end, she was forced to leave the country, and no one in my family has had contact with her until recently. My father, her ex-husband and his family did the same sort of thing that Weasley is doing. I fear that it will not get any better, but can and will only get worse."

There was a scratching at her window. Hermione wondered whose owl it could be. She felt a bit uneasy when she saw that it was not Pigwidgeon, but an unfamiliar owl,

and it seemed too early to expect a reply from her solicitor. She opened the window anyway and moved aside as the owl quickly deposited a Howler before leaving. One thing Hermione knew about Howlers, especially having dealt with quite a few in her life time, was that keeping a Howler bottled up only made it worse. She flicked her wand at the envelope and watched, in a state of dread, as the envelope rose up to eye level as it opened.

"YOU FILTHY MUDBLOOD! YOU DEFILED ONE OF OUR FINEST PUREBLOOD FAMILIES AND ARE NOW DISHONORING THEM WITH DIVORCE! IF YOU DON'T LIKE OUR WAYS, GO BACK TO YOUR MUGGLE WORLD!" it shouted before bursting into flames.

He gave her a sympathetic look. "Do you have somewhere else you can go?"

"My parents' house," she replied quietly, not really wanting to inflict any of this on him.

"Pack your things. I have a small, heavily protected cottage where you will be safe. There is no need for you to be subjected to a bombardment of hate mail," he offered.

"Thank you. I don't know what to say." She felt a little uncomfortable accepting his help, imposing on him, but it did not look like she had any choice since she did not want to subject her parents to the stream of Howlers she was sure to receive. "Though I sent an owl to my solicitor this morning and am expecting a reply," she called out as she went to the bedroom to quickly pack her belongings. She returned to the living room and packed her books.

Lucius arched an eyebrow and chuckled at her. "I will see that that owl, along with any from your husband, are allowed through the protections. Are you ready?"

"Sure, but you can't Disapparate from here. Let me take us someplace safe and then you can take us to the cottage."

"Of course," he replied.

As she took hold of his hand and thought of one of their camping areas from their time on the run, she could hear another owl scratching at her window and was glad to be leaving.

Lucius looked around the trees. She smiled when she realized that he might not recognize where they were. "This is the Forest of Dean, it's near Gloucester," she said, still holding his hand. It felt nice in her reassuring and strong something she desperately needed at that moment in her life.

"Ah, not far from our destination then." He patted her hand reassuringly before Disapparating them to their final destination. "Here we are."

Hermione was shocked. "This is a small cottage?" she asked as she stared at the large, grey stone edifice before her. From the front she counted eighteen large windows perfect for capturing natural light. Like most old country homes, it appeared to have three floors. From the number of chimneys on the roof, she guessed there had to be at least twenty rooms.

He laughed softly. "Well, when compared with the manor. It's not been used for a number of years, but it will be adequate for your needs."

He led her up the box hedge lined path to the door. She was struck by the perfectly manicured lawn that extended a good quarter mile from the 'cottage' to the trees. The foundation at the front of the building was lined with a neatly tended flower bed. On the corners of the building she could see ivy creeping towards the roof. He opened the door with a tap of his wand and, as a gentleman would, allowed her to enter before him, something Ron usually seemed to forget to do. Lucius' next words brought Hermione out of her gaping stupor.

"I know that you do not fully approve of the use of house-elves, but it will be easiest to have one of them to prepare the cottage for you. If you wish to do the cooking yourself, I can arrange for some Muggle money so that you can use the market in the local village."

She looked around the 'cottage'. It was decorated more like a hunting lodge, yet elegantly tasteful and luxurious. The large entry had a grand staircase that turned twice in the shape of a C as rose to the first floor. In the center of the C was a magnificent bronze statue of a large Chimera; a grim-eyed goat with massive horns, a lion's jaws and mane, massive front paws and cloven hind feet like a dragon, and a tail that ended in a snake's head with its fanged bared to strike.

To Hermione's left, she saw a parlor and what appeared, by the presence of a grand piano, to be a music room beyond that. Turning to her right, she saw what was sure to be her favorite room, a library. She couldn't see what was beyond the library, but she knew there had to be one more room. From where she was standing, she couldn't tell what rooms were on the back of the house, but this was a far grander residence than she had expected.

"Allow me to help you get settled," he offered, drawing her attention from the bronze sculpture.

"But surely you have work to do." She still felt guilty about imposing on him as she followed him into the drawing room. Her eyes could not stop taking in her surroundings and admiring the artwork: there were portraits galore and statues and busts in nooks lining the walls or on plinths.

"My dear, I own the company. I can do whatever I wish. Now, let's get this place ready for you to live here. Katta!" he called out.

"Yes, Master?" squeaked a house-elf that popped in out nowhere.

Hermione was pleased to see that Katta's garments were better than Dobby's had been under his Malfoy service. Her tea towel was clean and neatly pressed, looking almost brand new.

"Katta, this is Miss Hermione. She will be staying here, and I need you to get the cottage ready for living. And you are to treat her as a member of the family," Lucius said politely.

"Yes, Master, Mistress," Katta said with a bow to each of them before scurrying, Hermione assumed, to remove the protective sheets from the furniture.

Lucius turned to her. "Katta will see to whatever you need, and she will also protect you as I told her to treat you like a member of the family. You may use her assistance as much or as little as you wish. I will ask that you please do not try to give her clothes, though," he said the last with a crooked smile, alluding to her days of trying to liberate house-elves.

Hermione blushed. She had given up on that after the hat incident at Hogwarts. Hermione watched as Katta happily and efficiently folded then vanished the sheets with a pop and set a duster about cleaning the furniture while she hurried to the next room, getting everything ready for Hermione's stay. She could tell the elf was exuberant to have someone to take care of, and she wondered if the Katta lived here all alone the way Kreacher had. "No, I wouldn't do that. I know it would insult her."

"Thank you. Is there anything else I can do for you?" he asked gently.

She looked around and saw that Katta was happily polishing the Brazilian Rosewood furniture. "I don't think so. I suppose I'll get settled in and then... Well, I don't know." She was completely overwhelmed by what was happening.

"The property is walled off and you will be safe while you remain within those walls. The property is also warded against outside intrusion. There is nothing preventing you from coming or going, though I think understandably you will want to avoid wizarding enclaves for the time being.

She couldn't believe how much he was helping her. "Lucius, thank you. I really needed a friend today, and you were there for me."

He bowed slightly. "It is my pleasure to help you. I have seen firsthand how brutal the wizarding world views divorce and how unrelenting in their opinions the public can be, and I don't want to see your life destroyed." He held her gaze for a few moments before Disapparating.

Once he left, she decided to explore. Moving to the back of the 'cottage', she saw the room to the left of the stairs was a dining room that could easily seat twenty. Behind

the stairs was a small room decorated with green walls and a couple of small tables with chairs set on either side. There was a door that led to a large terrace that overlooked a very traditional English garden with box hedges planted in decorative patterns with rose bushes and statuary inside the patterns. While the house may not have been used in recent years, someone, or more likely some house-elves, were still taking care of the property. Continuing through the Green Room she saw a billiard room and another drawing room that led to a very formal bedroom at the front of the house, which looked as though it was fit for a king. Hermione recalled her history and recalled that in many old country manors they included state chambers that would indeed be reserved for the king. She found it a bit odd that not only would a Malfoy have built a house with a royal suite, but that it would have been kept as such for all these years.

Having finished her exploration of the ground floor, she moved up the stairs to the first floor, she once again admired the artwork. Most of it was landscapes of a non-magical nature with a handful portraits interspersed. There were more nooks holding vases and busts. The right of the stairs had four bedrooms, two on the front and two on the rear. Each was decorated in a different color: green, blue, burgundy and white. Moving to the opposite side of the house, there was a smaller sitting room and another drawing room on the front of the building with a large master suite taking up the back of the house.

At the second floor landing, she turned right and saw the two bedrooms on the back of the house were set up dormitory style with bunk beds and writing desks presumably used by children if there were a large number of guests. There were several other smaller rooms, which were either empty or stored dusty furniture and other boxed belongings. Of course since this was a wizard's house, there would be no need of servants' quarters. She was completely overwhelmed by what she was seeing. This was the type of building where she felt you should be walking on cheap carpet that lined the halls and looking over velvet ropes at the rooms, not freely wander about.

She moved back to the white room. It was the least masculine of the rooms and the only one without trophy animals on the walls.

"Katta," she called out quietly and the elf was instantly at her side, making her jump slightly.

"Yes, Mistress? How may Katta serve you?" the house-elf asked eagerly.

Hermione forced herself to not preach to Katta. "I'll be using this room, but you don't have to make up the room right now," she said, not wanting to stop Katta from her other work.

"Yes, Misstress. Katta will fix the room after Katta is finishes with the kitchen. If Katta may ask, what is Mistress's favorite colors?"

She could only presume that it was for the room. "Oh, I don't know, blues, reds, I've never really thought about it. Nothing too bright though."

"Yes, Mistress. And what about food? What is Mistress' favorite foods? Is there anything Mistress does nots like or something Mistress would prefer?"

A part of Hermione liked the idea of not having to cook, but she felt a little guilty about using the services of a house-elf. "No, nothing in particular, though I may cook some of my meals."

Katta's ears sagged and her smile faded in disappointment. "Oh. Yes, Mistress. Katta will stocks the pantry. But if there is anything Mistress needs, please lets Katta know."

As she watched Katta disappear, she was still amazed at how eager house-elves were to serve and the disappointment they showed when they were denied that chance. She would never understand the mindset of the house-elves.

With nothing else to do, she turned her attention to unpacking. Since she really did not own many clothes, it did not take her long. There were a couple of empty shelves in the room, and she unpacked her favorite books.

When she was done, she decided to explore the garden and take a walk around the property and pulled out her heavy cloak since there was a definite chill to the air, foretelling autumn's arrival.

As she was heading back to the house, she saw an owl approaching her. She knew that it could only be from her solicitor, Ron or Lucius. As she was in the open and there was nowhere for the owl to land, she extended her arm. As soon as she took the letter, it flapped off.

Looking at the letter, she saw it was from her solicitor. She quickly opened it and was utterly depressed by its contents. He offered no advice for countering the media blitz and actually suggested she give up on the divorce as the paperwork had not actually been returned to him.

She balled the letter up and threw it to the ground. After the fact she realized that she should hold onto the letter to show Lucius. She picked it up and smoothed it out as much as possible before stuffing it in her pocket. She then heard her stomach rumble and realized that it was time for lunch. Without work, she had lost track of the time, and it was still at least a fifteen minute walk back to the cottage.

She turned to hurry back and laughed out loud as she realized that she was now referring to the grand home as a cottage. As she opened the door, she was assaulted by a most wonderful smell.

"Welcome, Mistress. Katta makes a hearty soup and bakes fresh bread for you," the elf said proudly as Hermione followed her nose to the dining room. "May Katta takes your cloak, Mistress?"

"Thank you Katta," said Hermione as she handed Katta her cloak. "It smells wonderful."

After her invigorating walk and the hearty soup, Hermione moved to the comfortable looking couch by the fireplace in the drawing room, enjoying the fire that was blazing away in the hearth. It wasn't long before she fell asleep.

Hermione stirred and opened her eyes slowly when she realized that she was not alone in the room anymore, and momentarily panicked until she remembered where she was. Still groggy from sleep, it took a while to focus on the tall figure in the room, until Lucius' long blond hair and his elegantly cut grey trousers and steel-blue robes came into view. "You gave me a fright," she said as she struggled to sit up.

"I beg your pardon. I did not mean to startle you. I came by to check in on you and found you napping," he replied politely, sitting down on the chair opposite the sofa.

She loved how he was so considerate about her feelings. It was just so wonderful for someone to say those sorts of things, and it made her blush. "I've probably slept too long as it is," she said as she checked the clock and saw that it was after three. She had definitely slept too long.

"I presume that you have settled in?" he asked.

"I chose the white room no animal heads," she admitted and blushed.

One side of his mouth drew back into an amused smile. "Katta will remove the offending décor, but really, you'd be more comfortable in the master suite with your own private bath. I'll have Katta move your things, and if there is anything you need don't hesitate to mention it. She's a very efficient house-elf and highly accommodating."

Hermione hated the idea of costing the elf extra work, but refrained from saying so least she offend Lucius's hospitality. But clearly he wanted her in a more spacious room. "I really appreciate you doing this for me. I'm going to see if I can find a new place soon." She still felt a little guilty about accepting his help, though she knew that she had nowhere else to turn to at the moment.

He leaned forward and placed his hand on her knee. "Hermione, I don't think that you will be able to find a safe place right now. Stay here for a few weeks until things calm down."

"I just don't want to give Ron any more ammunition, which is what's going to happen if he finds out I'm staying at your cottage," she replied pointedly.

He frowned at her. "Well, then, I will have Reg draw up a tenancy agreement for your stay. I will ensure that it is a price commensurate with your previous residence since that is the amount of space you will be occupying here. Then there should be no question about the arrangement."

She wasn't sure he was right about the no question part if Ron or Harry found out, they'd be furious, and it would give Ron one more thing to blab to Rita Skeeter. But, on the other hand, she knew that leasing a room should remove any thoughts of impropriety. "Thank you," she replied. "I'm glad that you could understand my concern. Oh, and since you're here, I received this from my solicitor. I wanted to show it to you, to see what advice you can offer." She pulled the letter out of her pocket and handed it to him.

She waited patiently, ignoring the lump in her stomach when his brow creased as he read it, but when he looked her in the eyes, she was surprised by the seriousness of his expression. "Please, use Reg. He can truly help with this."

She sighed, knowing that it was impossible. "Lucius, I can't afford someone like him. I make decent money, but not that much."

"He will prorate his fees for you, taking into account how much you can afford," Lucius explained.

"Based on your recommendation?" she asked pointedly, wondering if that was what he meant. Surely a solicitor of his caliber didn't work on a sliding fee scale.

"I am a very good client," he said with a confident grin. His smile relaxed away as he took on a serious expression once more. "Hermione, you need the best lawyer you can get to help you fight this battle. That would be Reg. And solicitors of his caliber do take on cases at less than their full rate. As a hero of the war, no one would find it odd that he agreed to take you on as a client."

She leaned back against the couch. Ron was going to be difficult he was already making things hard on her, and her solicitor was practically useless. She realized she had no choice anymore; she needed a good solicitor who would help her. "You're right, aren't you?" she said sadly. "I have to, don't I?"

"I'm afraid so. I'll inform him you would like him to take your case, and the two of you can meet as soon as possible."

She looked at him in shock at his pronouncement. "On a Saturday?" she asked.

"You don't have time to wait until Monday. And as I said, I am a very good client. Please, let me help you. I don't want to see the same thing happened to you that happened to my sister, and that's precisely what's happening right now."

His tone was earnest, the concern was very clear in his voice. She could not resist the imploring, intent look he was giving her. "Lucius, I don't know that I can ever thank you for what you are doing for me."

"Please, don't concern yourself with that. Let me make the necessary arrangements, and we can discuss them over dinner. I'll return later," he said as he smiled warmly at her before rising from his seat.

She could not help but return his smile as she watched him exit, admiring the confidence of his stride, utterly grateful for his kindness and friendship. Now that she was rested from her nap, her mind was working better. She needed to write Ron the letter regarding the lease on their flat. It was clear that she would not be returning there, so if he wanted to keep the premises, he'd have to carry the rent alone.

She recalled seeing a desk in the library and walked across the hallway to see if there was letter writing material. On the desk was an elegant quill and ink set. Opening the right hand drawer, she was quite pleased to see plain parchment. She tapped the quill thoughtfully on her lips as she tried to determine what to write. Since he was already being petty and vindictive, she knew she had to make it as neutral as possible.

Ron,

As I am sure you have discovered, I have moved out of the flat. I do not intend to return, except to collect the last of my personal things. Your owls should be able to find me at my new residence, but please do not try to locate me, and do not contact me at work, either.

Hermione

She looked thoughtfully at the letter for several long minutes. It was only three sentences, but she still was not sure about it. Finally she decided to change the last sentence to read, *'Please send all correspondence to my solicitor, Mr. Reginald Forsythe.'*

Feeling much better about this version, she sealed the letter so that only Ron could open it and took advantage of the beautiful tawny owl Lucius had lent her. Having already walked around a fair portion of the grounds and not knowing when Lucius would return, she decided to use this time to look over some of the notes she had been collecting for her work on the dragon pox elixir. After retrieving the notes from the master suite, she went to the parlor where she could see the front door and began spreading them out on the table.

"Just can't get away from work, can you?" asked Lucius from behind her.

She jumped, not having heard him arrive. "You have got to stop doing that!" she said as she held her hand over her heart.

"My apologies. It's raining outside, so I Apparated directly into the family entrance," he explained as he handed his cloak to Katta, who had appeared at his side with a pop.

She found that odd because the characteristic pop of Apparition was something that she normally noticed. "I didn't hear you."

"Ah, yes," he said as he sat in a very relaxed manner in the chair across from hers. "Apparating silently is a little trick I've picked up over the years."

She knew that it was possible because Dumbledore had done it. "You'll have to teach me that little trick."

"Perhaps someday," he replied evasively.

She knew that Dumbledore had dabbled in the Dark Arts. "It's not Dark magic, is it?"

He chuckled softly, reminding her of how much she still did not know about the wizarding world. "No, my dear," he replied softly. "But just as not everyone can Apparate, not everyone who can Apparate can do so silently. Due to the complex nature of the magic involved in silent Apparition, it would be best to do so when the distraction of your divorce is over."

"Oh, of course," she replied, disappointed in his response.

"And speaking of which, Reg has agreed to meet with you this evening. He should be here shortly."

"A house call? You must be a very good client, indeed." She knew that she should not be surprised by the amount of influence Lucius wielded, but she was. Around her, he acted like any other wizard, no pretenses or public persona, and it was quite easy for her to forget how powerful he really was, even when she was ensconced in his disused country house.

"And because I know your work is important to you, I have arranged for the Floo here to be connected to the office. Your destination will be Webtree Hall. That will protect

you from anyone trying to accost you on the way to and from work."

"Thank you." He continued to think of all the things that she had not considered. She definitely valued his friendship.

"Though I daresay no one would fault you for taking a leave of absence," he offered.

"Aside from the fact I haven't earned any vacation time yet, I'm not going to give Ron the satisfaction of becoming a complete recluse," she replied defensively.

"As I had expected you to say. And one other bit of business." He pulled a document out of his pocket. "This is a standard tenancy agreement, and I think you will find everything in order. Well, mostly standard. It's open-ended and I am not going to require a deposit from you. I know I can trust you to respect my property."

She read it and saw that it was a he had said, and she felt no compunction about signing it. She did notice that it was not in his name, but under the name of Spinks and Spungen LLC, presumably one of his one of his more discreet holding companies. He was obviously trying to minimize his involvement in her life, and she was glad to see that. "I'm glad that's out of the way," she said as she signed it and handed it back to him.

"I wish that it were not necessary," replied Lucius. He took the parchment from her and returned it to his pocket.

There was a knock at the door, and Katta appeared to answer it.

Lucius rose to his feet. "Reg, thank you so much for coming over this evening," he said cordially as he shook the older wizard's hand as Hermione walked over to stand beside him.

"Given the situation, it was imperative, Mr. Malfoy," Reg said, returning the handshake and then handed his damp cloak to Katta.

Lucius gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "I'll be in the other room," he said softly before leaving.

Once Lucius was gone, Reg moved into the parlor and said, "Mrs. Weasley, I am so sorry we had to meet under these circumstances. I took the liberty of requesting the divorce filing from your previous solicitor, which Mr. Weasley has not yet signed, correct?"

Hermione quickly gathered up her notes, and Reg started spreading pieces of parchment on the table before taking a seat in a chair.

Hermione took the chair across from Reg. "Not to my knowledge."

"Good, good. That will work in our favor. I submitted a petition to invalidate that document as you have secured new counsel, so if he tries to file it now, it will be rejected," replied Reg professionally.

"So, is there something we can do so that I don't look like the anti-wizard villain?" she asked cautiously, afraid that the damage was already done.

"There is always something that can be done. It's a matter of will and influence, and I have both. Now, I know you said you didn't want to hurt or embarrass your husband, but he has shown that he will not pull any punches. I will do what I can to protect his reputation, but I will need your permission to act in your best interests," Reg said seriously.

She knew that Reg was correct, that the time for being nice was over. She nodded. "Do what is necessary," she finally relented.

They spent the next two hours going over every detail of her married life and strategizing how to counter Ron's accusations and to win the media war. While they were working, Katta served them a dinner of tappas.

Hermione was mentally exhausted by the time Reg excused himself to meet with his contacts at the *Daily Prophet* and *The Mopsus Augur*. Hermione thought maybe she'd also contact Luna to print her side in *The Quibbler*. She slumped back in her chair as Lucius returned to the parlor. He walked over and laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder, and she reached up and placed her hand over his. "It's just beginning, isn't it?"

Lucius smiled sadly at her. "I'm afraid so. What you did today took a great deal of courage." He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

"I couldn't have done it without your help. I still can't believe Ron did that to me. I know you said it would disgrace the family, but this..." She just did not know how to put it into words.

He moved behind her chair and began rubbing her shoulders. "You are strong and you will survive this."

"Mmm... That feels so good." She hadn't had a good shoulder massage in a long time, and it made her realize how tense she was.

"Get some rest, my dear. I'll check on you tomorrow," Lucius whispered in her ear.

When he stopped rubbing her shoulders, she wanted to tell him not to stop, but she was very tired and now feeling very relaxed. "Good night, Lucius, and thank you."

He took hold of her hand in both of his. "It was my pleasure," he responded and gave her hand one last gentle pat before releasing it. He smiled warmly at her before Disappearing.

His smile had made her heart flutter. She tried to blame it on being exhausted, but she was not sure that was the only reason. It was foolish to 'feel' anything for Lucius, and she tried to push that from her mind, but she had not wanted to let him leave. Not just because she really did not want to be alone, but because she enjoyed his company.

A/N: As always many thanks to my wonderful beta, beawesley2. She is also the steward of the idea of the Chimera statue. Here is a picture of the statue.



As always, I appreciate every review that you dear readers leave. I will apologize if future chapters come a little more slowly as we have caught up to everything that has been beta read and there is some serious editing coming to future chapters and brainstorming has led to new plot developments that lead to a much richer story than the bare bones, written in 30 days original version. Your patience is appreciated.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 of 29

Lucius ensures that Hermione is adjusting to her new life in seclusion and joins his friend Connor for a very unexpected activity.

Chapter 21

Lucius returned home utterly frustrated. Walking into his study, he surveyed the sideboard before pouring himself some Scotch. He was completely smitten, but the current situation prevented him from acting on his feelings. Once again, he had almost lost control. He had known that she needed to relax, to release her tension, but rubbing her shoulders had been perhaps too intimate. When she had moaned, it had been music to his ears, and he had once again found his lips dangerously close to hers. The worst part was that he knew that he could not avoid her. She needed his friendship more than ever right now.

He was impressed, though. She seemed to be holding up well, but he knew that appearances could be deceptive. As he had seen before, the strongest people had the farthest to fall when they finally broke, and her divorce was bound to stretch her to her limits. He had to do what he could to prevent that from happening.

He was thankful that she had agreed to use Reg as her solicitor. There was no one else he would trust with this level of damage control. That morning's article in the paper had looked bad, very bad, but Reg was very good. It was going to be a very ugly week. He wished that Hermione would take the week off from work, but she had been correct that doing so would hand her husband a minor victory.

It would be a long hard fight, and while what was said in the papers should not make a difference to the Wizengamot, it would make a difference in how she was perceived by the wizarding world.

While he was beyond caring what the wizarding world thought about him, he knew that it would be difficult on her if she were labeled a dissenter and pariah. Every resource at his disposal would be used to save her from the same pain his sister had gone through.

Lucius was enjoying his breakfast on Saturday morning when a house-elf arrived with the paper. Eager to see what was being reported, he opened the paper.

As he read the rebuttal article front and center on the front page, he smirked victoriously. The new article perfectly countered everything that had been presented the day before. He wished that he could see the look on Weasley's face as the young man opened the paper and saw that his attempt to vilify Hermione had been completely turned around, and now he appeared to be the tyrant.

Later in the morning, he would deliver the paper to Hermione so that she could see she had made the right choice in agreeing to have Reg as her solicitor. He knew that this was just the beginning of the battle, but Weasley was now placed on the defensive.

Hopefully early in the week, the divorce papers would be finalized. Once that happened, it could get on the docket for the Wizengamot. While he could use his ties to move her case up on the docket, he knew that was one form of aid that she would not appreciate. Not to mention it might be difficult to explain his interest in her petition.

Of course, the worst part would be the waiting period of the Wizengamot decree before the divorce would be final. He knew those would be the longest six weeks of his life, because he did not want to do anything to jeopardize her situation. Then he'd be able to court her. Of course, it would have to seem as if he'd just taken interest in her, and in all appearances, he would have to follow all the normal protocols, behaving with perfect decorum publically. Privately...

Pushing that from his mind, he finished his breakfast and prepared to present the good news to Hermione.

When Lucius arrived at the cottage, he found Hermione in the drawing room curled up on the sofa before the fire reading a book. He smiled warmly at her. "I thought you might have been outside enjoying the day."

She closed her book and returned his smile. "I like to start my Saturdays off reading in the morning."

"Well then, I have something you might be interested in." He sat beside her on the sofa and handed her the paper.

Her eyes widened as she read the article. "In one evening Mr. Forsythe was able to accomplish all this?"

He chuckled softly. "I told you that Reg is very good at what he does. This should start to sway the tide of public opinion back in your favor or at least return it to a neutral state."

"But this won't be the last of it, will it?" she asked, pointing at the paper.

Shaking his head sadly, Lucius replied, "I expect not, but your rationale is quite compelling and quite hard to ignore."

"If I had listened to you in the beginning and agreed to use Mr. Forsythe this all could have been avoided," she said sadly as she slumped back into her seat.

He placed a reassuring hand on her knee. "I doubt it. You would not have wanted to take your case to the press first, and Mr. Weasley would have still done this to try to discredit you. He, and his family, is trying to salvage *their* reputation." By association with Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, the Weasleys had moved to a level of prominence that had long been absent from their family.

"Well if he had just signed the ruddy paperwork and agreed to do this quietly, it wouldn't have been an issue, would it?" Hermione said, not hiding her frustration.

"Perhaps not a public one, but it still would have been whispered about. Especially once one of you was seen in public with someone else."

There was a long silence. "So what now?" she finally asked.

"I'm sure that Reg offered you some advice," Lucius replied. He wanted to be careful to not be seen as too overbearing.

"He did, but I'm interested in your advice. After all, you saw how this all unfolded with your sister."

"That was different. She had no one on her side," he replied evasively.

She turned sideways on the sofa so she could look directly at him. "Please?"

He took a deep breath and considered his words carefully. "For the next few days, I would not recommend going out into any of the wizarding enclaves. Give everyone time to see how it plays out in the press. You've already made clear your intention to return to work. I would keep your usual routine at work. I have no doubt that everyone will be quite professional, and you will not be harassed at work." If any of his employees said anything to defame Hermione, they would quickly find themselves out of a job. "Once you have seen where the public sentiment lies, you can make your decision about where you spend your time when you are off work." He longed to keep her hidden away here, protected from prying eyes, under his watchful care, but he knew that if she retreated entirely from the wizarding world, that would invite speculation of a sort she did not need.

"Well, it's not like I have much of a social life," she joked. "But I will steer clear of Flourish and Blotts for the time being." She fussed with her fingers a little. "But do you think that my life will return to some semblance of normal?"

He tilted her chin up with his fingers so that she had to look at him. "I do. Reg has the knowhow and connections necessary to preserve your reputation." He wanted to add that he would protect her, but he knew that he could not yet say that aloud. "Now I'm afraid that I won't be able to keep you company the whole day, but I can stay through lunch."

"I understand. I still cannot thank you enough for everything you are doing. Will you be able to stop by tomorrow?"

"Perhaps for a little while in the morning, but I have business to attend to in the afternoon." He didn't really, he just didn't want her to know how important she was to him, not yet. Besides, he didn't know that he trusted himself to maintain control if he spent the entire day alone with her. He longed to pull her into her arms, to reassure her that everything would work out for the best in the end, but that could only lead to one conclusion: to kiss her rosy lips. Something he truly longed to do, yet was currently forbidden.

She tried to hide her disappointment. "Of course. I'm sure I can occupy myself here."

Her words pulled him back into the moment. "Well, if you run out of books that are to your liking, you can always have Katta ask me to retrieve something for you from the manor," he offered.

"Thank you. I saw a number of interesting books in the library, but I'll keep that offer in mind. And while we're talking about this *cottage*, it is rather grandiose."

He had known that she would eventually ask him about the cottage and was surprised it had taken this long. "It was the second Malfoy home in England. The first was the castle that Draco has converted to an inn. As life became more peaceful, my ancestors wanted something more elegant than a fortress and this house was commissioned in the early 1500s. By the mid 1600s the family fortune had increased considerably, and the Wiltshire manor was commissioned. This property then passed to the younger son. After a couple of generations that line died out, and it reverted to my line. Since then it has been where the older son has resided upon marriage, at least until Draco chose the family castle. During times when it was unoccupied by a permanent resident, it has been used as a hunting lodge and retreat from the manor."

"And the house-elves maintain it?" she asked curiously.

"They rotate from the manor so that none of them are left alone here. If Draco had chosen this as his residence, he would have received several house-elves as his personal servants, and they would've permanently moved here."

She considered his words for a few moments. "It's amazing to have that sort of family history. I'm lucky we know the names of my great-great grandparents on my mother's side, but we have little else beyond my great-grandparents. Genealogy has just never been a family interest. I presume that somewhere there was someone magical, but we just don't know much about anyone from before about 1900 and you sit here and calmly talk about your family history from the 1500s. Earlier than that because of the castle."

There was an uncomfortable silence, and he looked away for a moment since Lucius didn't want to seem as if he was bragging about being a pureblood. All wizarding families kept meticulous records of their genealogy, and his was no exception. The Greengrass, Elphick and Radluff families could trace their heritage back to the 1100's, and the Barkwith, Keedle and Wentlock families to the eleventh century. The Woods even claimed to go back further, claiming to be descended from Hogsmeade's founder, Hegist of Woodcroft; not to mention the Smiths who claimed to be descended from Helga Hufflepuff.

Hermione looked down at her hands and finally broke the silence. "I'm sorry. I know how that sounded."

"It's quite understandable. I did spend a number of years underestimating the value of those with Muggles in their family lines."

"The gardens are absolutely lovely. I don't know that I've seen a finer English garden," she said.

Lucius welcomed this change in conversation and they chatted pleasantly until lunch, changing subjects at will.

As the meal wore on, Hermione grew more withdrawn, her mind apparently drifting elsewhere.

Lucius reached his hand across the table and placed it on hers. "It will get better, and you won't have to sequester yourself away for long."

"I know. I just keep thinking about how difficult this whole ordeal is turning out to be; how if I had thought this through, I wouldn't have rushed into marriage; how if Ron had just seen reason and signed the papers this could all be over with. I can't get my mind to slow down."

"Perhaps a relaxing bath this evening would allow you to get some rest? For now there is little that you can do. Reg is handling the legal and press issues. Until you plead your case before the Wizengamot, there is not much for you to do. The best thing that you can do is relax and go about your life as normally as possible." He did what he could to boost her confidence, but he feared that it might not be enough. "I do wish I could stay longer, but unfortunately I am expected elsewhere."

"I appreciate you taking the time to spend the morning with me that means a lot. I'll be fine. I'll take a walk, spend some time outside and clear my head." After looking into his eyes a few moments, she added, "Really, I'll be fine. I just need some time to organize my mind."

He nodded his head and reluctantly rose to his feet. "Then I shall see you tomorrow morning. Perhaps I can interest you in a game of chess?"

"I'd like that, although I'm really only a fair player Ron was the one who excelled at the game. But maybe you could teach me to be a better player," she added hopefully, apparently not wanting to discourage the suggestion.

"We'll see. I'll try to curb my competitive nature at conquest," he stated then wished he hadn't. He really didn't want to show any inclination of his feelings for her. "I'll see you tomorrow."

She smiled warmly at him again, saying, "Tomorrow; I look forward to it," before he departed.

When Lucius returned to his manor, he went to the wine cellar first, selected a wine he knew Hermione enjoyed and summoned a house-elf to deliver it to the cottage. He then went to his study to go through the neglected stack of post. None of it was urgent, just the usual assortment of charity solicitations and invitations to various social events, but he knew he shouldn't put off responding to them any longer.

After he had finished with the post, he swiveled his chair around to look out the window. The truth was he had nothing scheduled for the afternoon he just didn't trust himself to spend all day with Hermione. His feelings for the woman were strong, and growing so with every moment he spent in her presence.

He needed a diversion.

Perhaps he would drop in and see what Connor was up to that afternoon.

He sent a message to his friend by Floo and walked purposefully out into the foyer to Apparate. When he arrived at the Greengrasses, Felicia informed him that Connor had just left for the stables to chase down a sounder of wild boars that had recently begun knocking down fences and tearing up their vegetable patch. Lucius decided this could be the diversion he needed and went to the stable to join Connor on the hunt.

Connor was already mounted and saw Lucius approaching from the main house. "Ah, Lucius! Come to join the fun?" he asked once Lucius was close enough to hear.

"How could I miss out on something like this?" Lucius replied jovially. With a quick flick of his wand, he transfigured his low cut boots into riding boots and watched as the stable hand expertly saddled a horse for him. Lucius saw the huntsman trying to maintain control of four feisty Rhodesian Ridgebacks who were clearly eager for the hunt.

"Good, good. Having another wand will definitely help. Ruddy boars are digging up all the root vegetables. Not sure how much we'll salvage from what they haven't eaten, but I might as well get something out of it. Nothing like a good roast boar, is there?"

Lucius grinned. "Definitely not. Shall we?"

The two men spent the afternoon trying to track down the reclusive boars. After nearly two hours, they had success. Unfortunately they were only able to bring down two of them before the sounder scattered into the dense underbrush.

Connor dismounted to check his kill. "Immature boar. Looked like they had a large litter this year. What did you get, Lucius?"

"You're in luck, my friend. I've bagged you a breeding sow," Lucius said proudly.

"Ah, now that is good news," Connor said as he came over to stand beside Lucius. "Two is better than none. Care to join me again tomorrow morning?"

"Normally I would say yes, but tomorrow is quite a busy day for me. I'm having dinner with Draco and Astoria."

"That sounds wonderful. Perhaps I'll organize a hunt for next Saturday, see if I can get rid of these vermin. Though if it takes that long, we won't have any veg left at all. Hmmmm... I'll talk to Felicia, but sounds like a good time to have dinner party on Friday, roasting up one of these beauties to put people in the spirits for the hunt on Saturday," Connor said as though thinking aloud.

Lucius knew that a hunt would be an all-day affair, and he did not want to completely abandon Hermione. "Dinner I am amenable to, as long as Felicia understands that she does not need to try to fix me up with anyone, but unfortunately my Saturday is already booked up."

Connor eyed Lucius suspiciously. "It's Fiendfyre, my friend," he cautioned, clearly assuming Lucius' plans involved his mystery witch.

Lucius dismissed Connor's concern. "Do you honestly think I would be so indiscreet? I merely have business to attend to."

"For someone who owns the company, you sure do work long hours." Connor said before calling for one of his house elves to see to the dead boars.

Lucius and Connor mounted their horses for the ride back to the stables, leaving the huntsman to take control of the dogs. "And now you know why we Malfoys have been as successful as we have." Lucius then spurred his horse, issuing a challenge to Connor that they should race back. Lucius knew that he would need the head start as Connor had the better mount, however the forested terrain would work in his advantage as he was the better horseman. Both men raced through the trees, Lucius keeping well ahead of Connor, but he knew that he would need to be ahead a fair bit by the time they reached the main grounds otherwise Connor would overtake him on the flat.

Nevertheless, Connor ended up beating Lucius back to the stable by a length. Both mounts were breathing heavily from the exertion and a pair of stable-hands appeared to remove the tack and release the horses to the paddock where they could properly recover. Lucius and Connor were also breathing heavily and laughing.

"Are you trying to kill me? Racing out of the woods like that," Connor said.

"I thought you could use something to liven the afternoon. Good show," Lucius replied as he held his hand out in a congratulatory handshake. He then saw Felicia approaching.

She stopped before the two of them, her hands on her hips, glaring from one to the other in disapproval. "Look at the two of you: racing across the grounds like a couple of teenagers. You're lucky neither of you were seriously injured at the speed you were going."

"Just a little bit of a lark," Lucius replied, laughing off her concern as he pulled off his riding gloves.

"Honestly, Felicia, don't you think the two of us know how to ride by now?" Connor said, trying to reassure her it was nothing dangerous.

"If it were just on the grounds, I wouldn't say anything, but I saw the two you burst out of the woods," she said, pointing her finger from one to the other and back again. "Despite the fact the two of you are idiots, I do think that Scorpius would like to know his *grandfathers*." She arched her eyebrow menacingly.

"Bah! You worry too much." Connor gave her a kiss on the cheek as he walked by her. "I could use something cold to drink. How about you?" he called back to Lucius.

"And a bath," Felicia retorted.

Connor stopped to blow her a kiss. "Oh, I thought we might have a dinner party Friday to share the boar, with perhaps another hunt on Saturday."

Lucius fell in step with Connor after giving Felicia a small bow. "Well, that was unexpected. Good thing you weren't with anyone important," Lucius quipped about Felicia's outburst.

"You're family, Lucius. That means she doesn't hold anything back. Here's to hoping your mystery witch is not a fiery redhead."

Rather than head indoors, the two men enjoyed cold drinks in the back garden. Mostly because they did not want to hear Felicia complain about how they were stinking up the house with the smell of horse.

As he had no other plans, Lucius was coaxed into staying for dinner, provided he cleaned himself up. Lucius tarried up to one of the guest room to freshen up, unsurprised to see a fresh set of robes had been laid out on the bed. Smiling at Felicia's *thoughtfulness*, he showered quickly and dressed for dinner.

As per usual when he dined with the Greengrasses, dinner was an enjoyable affair; Lucius and Connor recounted their afternoon of boar hunting, much to Felicia's chagrin, followed by Lucius telling them about his visit with his sister. He figured this would get Felicia's mind off his paramour. All in all, it had been a very enjoyable evening.

Sunday morning, Lucius returned to the cottage to see Hermione and bring her the latest *Daily Prophet*. There had been a small interior article regarding the divorce filing, another article reviewing the 'facts' and reasons for the two 'war heroes' to divorce, and a mention of the last notable divorce in England, which annoyed him since that

divorce was his sister's. Lucius would have Reg put a stop to any further mention of his sister's history. There was a lengthy article about Hermione's and Mr. Weasley's 'protection' of Potter after the Dark Lord took over the Ministry and a recounting of their part in the final battle, but there had been nothing new reported by Ron's camp. Apparently they had dished all their dirt in the first article.

Lucius sat sipping on a fine Earl Grey tea while Hermione read the paper. "My life is an open book," Hermione exclaimed with a sigh, turning the pages. "Is nothing private to these people?"

"Very little," Lucius said as he set down his cup, watching her for a moment as her eyes scanned the pages. When it appeared that she was nearly done perusing the paper, he opened the lid of his golden rosewood chess box to let the pieces out.

"Did you have chess pieces of your own?" Lucius asked as his chess pieces walked to their proper places on the chess board. His set had been a gift from his grandfather on his eighth birthday exquisitely carved onyx. He had brought a second set of intricately crafted green jadeite in case she did not have any.

"What? Oh..." Hermione paused in thought. "I think I grabbed them. Let me check." She headed upstairs to her room. After a few minutes, she returned. "No, I don't seem to have grabbed them," she replied, sounding somewhat uncomfortable.

Lucius looked at her curiously. "Hermione?"

"Okay, I didn't forget them. I just... they were a gift from... I'd rather not use them," she finally admitted as she took the seat opposite Lucius.

Lucius understood perfectly. Clearly her husband had given them to her, and she did not want that reminder of him. "Perfectly understandable. You may use these," he said as he presented her with an intricately carved alabaster box.

She gently took the box from his hands and opened it. Inside was a finely carved, feminine set of chess pieces. "They're gorgeous," she said as she reverently examined one of the pawns. "I've never seen a set where the pieces were mostly women."

"I had it specially commissioned," he replied simply. He had given this set to Narcissa for their first wedding anniversary after she had expressed an interest in learning to play.

Hermione clearly understood what he left unsaid. "Well, I hope my game is a match for their beauty."

Over chess, Lucius found that he was able to get Hermione's mind almost completely off her personal life. It helped that he also engaged her in their continued debate about Filmore Stevens. It was a hard fought match, but after close to two hours, he was forced to reluctantly concede. "You play an excellent game."

"Thanks. It's been a while since I've played. You didn't make it easy." She paused. "So, this upcoming week?"

"Is there something specific about this week you wish to know?" he asked carefully, not wanting to sound eager.

"I feel like I'm imposing, but it's been really nice having someone to talk to, someone who doesn't hold recent events against me. And..." her voice trailed off. She was clearly uncomfortable asking for more of his time.

"As my schedule allows, I would be happy to join you in the evenings. I do have a dinner party on Friday, and I have a standing dinner on Tuesday, but I see nothing that should prevent me from joining you the other evenings if you would like some company."

She perked up and smiled broadly. "I would be honored to share your company."

He carefully packed his chess pieces back in their box, and Hermione did the same for hers. "Now I do regret having to leave, but Draco is expecting me for Sunday dinner."

"I understand. Maybe I'll drop by and see my folks. I haven't told them about the separation, and I know they'll have questions... I suppose I've put it off long enough, and I suppose it's better to tell them sooner rather than later, isn't it?" she said the last with a chuffed laugh.

Lucius answered seriously. "Indeed it would be."

She looked out the window. "I suppose I've been putting it off because I don't want to disappoint them."

"I'm sure you'll know when the time is right, and I'm sure they will understand. I'll leave the pieces here for a rematch." He rose to his feet and gently kissed the back of her hand before departing.

The following week would be quite busy for Lucius. He knew that Hermione needed his friendship, and despite his near loss of control, he intended to share dinner with her and provide her the emotional support she needed. In his professional life, he had several important business deals in the works which required a good deal of his attention, including several meetings with Elsa to help her finalize the new management for the Kesselwerks. Finally, he had his promise to Delilah to fulfill and had invited Draco to come over on Monday afternoon. This was news he wanted to share when he had Draco's undivided attention rather than at Sunday dinner. He knew that he was not getting enough sleep, but there was nothing to be done about it until each event was resolved.

The war of words was continuing in the press, but at least it had moved out of headline position. Much of that had to do with the fact that Weasley's defense was very one-dimensional. His entire defense hinged on the fact that she was rejecting the traditional role of a married witch as mother first.

With Hermione's side of the story that Weasley was trying to force her to have children before she was ready, and that he was trying to subvert her to his will and rob her of her independence, sentiment had shifted to her side as she proved that she was not rejecting motherhood, merely wishing to postpone it for a few years, to wait until she felt better equipped to be a mother.

He knew that Hermione had not set out to start a social revolution, but she just might be doing that by proving that a young woman could enjoy a career before starting a family.

She seemed to be holding up well, but he could tell that she missed her extended family. He wished there was a way for her to contact them, but until the divorce decree was made, she needed to refrain from contacting them lest she accidentally let something slip that would make its way back to Weasley and be used against her.

Monday afternoon, Lucius left the office later than he had intended. When he returned home, Draco was lounging in the drawing room, listening to the Wireless. "Good to see you, Draco," he said. "I'd offer you something to drink, but I see you've helped yourself," he replied as he moved to the sideboard to pour himself some brandy.

"Well, you did ask me to meet you here twenty minutes ago. I thought I'd make myself at home." Draco sat on the edge of his seat as his father chose a nearby chair. "So, you have me curious as to why you asked to speak to me alone. Normally you love it when Scorpius and Astoria come along. Or you could have told me yesterday at dinner."

"Normally yes, but what I wanted to discuss with you does not yet concern them." Lucius took a sip of his drink. "I've reached out to Aunt Delilah."

Draco's eyes widened in shock. "You're kidding!"

He had expected this reaction since he had given no indication he was even thinking of his sister. "I assure you, I am not. We've been writing for the last few weeks,

catching up with each other, and I visited her last week. I would have told you sooner, but I wasn't sure if she would be amenable to restoring our relationship."

"How is she?"

"She's doing very well." Lucius spent the next fifteen minutes telling Draco about her family and answering some of his questions.

"So will she be visiting here?" Draco asked.

"Perhaps in time. She says she's not ready yet, even for a private visit. And she has not yet revealed her entire past to her family. She lives a modest life now, and I daresay her family will be quite shocked when they learn more about us. If you can arrange some time away from the inn, she was open to having all of us visit her there."

Draco leaned back in his chair. "I think I'd like that. I'll see what I can arrange with my general manager, Warren Trent. And I assume you have no problem with me writing to her."

Lucius shook his head. "Definitely not. She was excited at the prospect of hearing from you and learning more about Scorpius and Astoria."

Draco eyed his father curiously. "Why now?"

Lucius decided a partial truth was better than an outright lie. "I was wandering the halls a few weeks back and stumbled upon a family portrait from shortly after she graduated Hogwarts. I caught a flash of her yellow dress at the edge of the frame. It made me remember how much I missed her and how stubborn I have been over the years. I reached out to her that very evening."

Draco was momentarily stunned silent at his father's sentimental admission. "I'm glad you did." He looked at the mantle as the clock chimed five. "I should get going to help Astoria; she has a wedding happening this weekend at the inn, and I should go oversee dinner and new arrivals. I'll let you know when would be a good time to visit Aunt Delilah. If you're free on Sunday afternoon, you could come over for lunch. Astoria's mother had something come up, and I know Scorpius would love to see his favorite grandfather."

"How can I resist when my favorite grandson wants to see me?" Lucius replied with a smile.

"Considering he's your *only* grandson..." Draco quipped.

Lucius walked with Draco to the foyer. "Perhaps that will change someday." He looked sadly at Draco. "I only wish we had been able to give you a brother or sister."

"Don't get all sentimental on me, Father. And we'll see about expanding our family. Right now, we have our hands full with just Scorpius. See you Sunday," Draco said before Disapparating.

Lucius took a deep breath to clear his mind. He had been getting quite sentimental, which was not normally like him. Recent events really were stretching him too thin. Once he had composed himself, he left to join Hermione for dinner.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 of 29

Hermione faces the wizarding world for the first time since news of her impending divorce became public, and she adjusts to a new 'normal'.

Chapter 22

Monday morning Hermione stood before the fireplace, a pinch of Floo powder in her hand. This would be her first contact with the greater wizarding world since news of her divorce broke. Rationally, she knew that she worked with professionals, but she also knew that quite a few people enjoyed gossip, no matter what their position in life. She took a deep breath as she stepped into Floo, threw the powder into the grate and said, "Malfoy's Potions research lab." After several disorienting seconds, she found herself in the employee lounge. When she emerged, she went down the hall to the stairs and made her way up to her lab.

Harold greeted her when she entered. "Good morning, Hermione. Glad you could make it today."

She smiled at the warmth of his greeting. "So am I. I hope my absence didn't hinder the project any. Did I miss much?" she asked as she took her lab coat off the hook and hung up her bag.

"We left notes at your station that'll explain it all." After a moment he added, "Are you going to be okay?"

She gave him a reassuring smile. "I am."

It didn't take her long to review the notes and immerse herself in her work. It was almost surreal how everyone behaved completely normal as though the events of Friday and the weekend had not happened.

Before she knew it, it was time to break for lunch. She saw Gilles sitting at their usual table, and he waved her over. However, there was an uncomfortable silence since it seemed they were each waiting for the other to speak first. Finally, she said, "The divorce is what I wasn't sure when... I mean, it was what I didn't want to share with you."

"That is as I suspected when I saw the paper on Friday and you did not show up to work." He paused a moment. "Did you want to talk about it now?"

"Well, if you've read the papers, it's all pretty much there." She still couldn't believe the sheer number of personal details which had been laid bare in the paper. She picked at her salad absentmindedly, wondering what she could say. "We were young I thought we were in love, but no, apparently it was only lust! If he'd loved me we might have been able to work it out... But we were caught up in the moment and completely immature..." She flicked a cucumber slice to the side of her plate as he took a bite of his sandwich, watching her carefully.

"And it seems that he still is," she pierced her tomato, "the git."

"Some people take longer to grow up than others. My brother is 29 and has yet to hold a steady job, much to my parents' dismay. Of course I am sure he is being rebellious to spite them since they keep telling him he should be more successful like me. I don't think anyone wants to be told they should be like their younger sibling."

"I suppose not. I'm an only child, but Ron has four older brothers. I've never heard his parents telling him he should be more like his brothers, but I know he always felt their shadows. Despite what you saw going on in the papers, he's not a bad person," she said, defending her decision to marry Ron as much as defending Ron himself.

"You don't need to explain it. Although divorce is uncommon among French wizards and witches as well, I do know what you are going through."

She sighed and set down her fork. "I just wish it hadn't come to this. I had hoped we could do this amicably, quietly. Now I feel like a pariah."

He reached across the table and placed his hand on hers. "Well, I don't think you are a pariah. I think you are quite brave." He flashed her a reassuring grin.

She laughed. "Brave or completely mental. I think it will depend on how this ends up. I just need to be me, and it seemed like everyone was trying to stifle me. I was trying to live up to everyone else's' expiations and ignoring what I really wanted who I really am. I'm just trying to follow through with my dreams, to do what I'd to do what's right for me. That's why I started working here."

They ate in silence for a few minutes. "How do you feel?" Gilles finally asked.

She looked into his warm brown eyes as she considered her answer. "Confused, honestly. I'm relieved that this is finally moving forward. Scared that it might get denied. I mean if we have to remain married... Well, I just don't see us harmoniously living under the same roof after this. And just anxious to get on with my life, to see if there is someone out there for me."

"I'm sure there is," he answered and then quickly turned his attention to his lunch. "I am no expert in British law, but it seems to me it would be foolish to make the two of you continue your marriage. He does not seem to understand you very well."

"It's not just his fault. I didn't understand him as well as I thought I did, or maybe I just overestimated how much I understood him. I know this is for the best, but it still feels... wrong, I guess is the best word." She picked out the bits of her salad she was interested in eating. "I should probably get back to work since I missed Friday."

She was about to stand up, when Gilles said, "Hermione, if you find you would like someone to talk to, I know of a few decent Muggle restaurants."

She looked at him, considering his offer. She did enjoy spending time with him, and they always had such lively discussions. Besides, it was a better option than sitting alone at the cottage, especially since Mr. Forsythe had strongly recommended that she not meet with any mutual friends she and Ron had. Normally she might have decided to talk to Harry, Ginny or George, but now that wasn't an option. "How about tomorrow after work?" she offered.

He smiled at her. "I'll stop by your lab at the end of the day."

"But we don't talk about this. How about the French Revolution?" She reasoned if she was going to get out, she should also get away from what was bothering her, at least for a few hours.

"Of course. And this will give me time to prepare for our debate this time," he replied playfully.

"You aren't the only one," she replied, even though she knew she would be spending the evening with Lucius. See you tomorrow at lunch and perhaps we can start our discussion then."

"I look forward to it. Au revoir, Hermione," he said as she got to her feet.

By the end of the day, Hermione felt she was finally caught up with her work. It had been refreshing to return to work. For the most part she had been able to keep her mind off of Ron and the impending divorce. Lucius had been correct, there was nothing she could do other than just go about her normal activities.

Shortly before five, she and the others cleaned up their work and gave brief reports to Harold about their day's work. She said her goodbyes to everyone and went to the lounge to Floo back to the cottage. Shortly before entering the lounge, she realized that she would have to say her destination aloud and ducked into the loo. She would wait a few minutes until everyone had cleared out. The last thing she needed any of her coworkers hearing was that she was going to Malfoy's cottage, even though it was called Webtree Hall. After all, she was Muggle born and the Weasleys weren't well off, so someone was bound to show the wrong sort of curiosity.

After about ten minutes, she figured that the lounge should be empty. She was relieved that it was.

Once back at the cottage, she changed out of her work robes and let Katta know that Lucius would be joining her for dinner. She then perused her books and the small collection in the cottage library and noticed there was not a decent tome on the French Revolution. Then she recalled that Lucius had offered her the use of his library. "Katta," she called into the air.

With a loud crack, the house-elf as before her. "Yes, Mistress? Is there something Katta can be doing for you?" she asked eagerly.

Hermione asked, "Katta, do you think you could go to Mr. Malfoy's library and bring back a few books on the French Revolution?"

Katta nodded eagerly. "Oh, yes, Mistress. Katta would be happy to bring Mistress some books."

Before Hermione could say anything else, Katta disappeared with a pop and returned a few minutes later with a stack of about twenty books. "If Mistress requires more books, Katta can be returning and lookings for others," she said as she placed the stack of books on the desk.

Hermione divided the stack before it toppled over. "I'm sure this will be fine." She had expected maybe three or four books. After pursing the books, she found two or three that might be useful to her discussion with Gilles and put the rest of them on one of the shelves so they didn't clutter the desk. She then went to the parlor and curled up with her chosen books while she waited for Lucius to join her.

It was shortly after seven before Lucius popped out of thin air. "My apologies. I had hoped to be here sooner."

She jumped when he spoke as he had arrived silently. "Oh, it's fine. I've just been reading. I was actually lost in the book."

He crossed the room to join her on the sofa. "The French Revolution?" he said as he looked at the book she was reading.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I wanted to read something different, and it was the first thing that came to mind. Dinner should be ready," she said as she put the book down.

"Thank you for waiting for me." He stood and offered her his hand. "How was your day at work?" He led her to the dining room table and pulled the chair out for her.

She took her seat and placed her napkin in her lap. "It felt good. No one brought the divorce up. I'm feeling a lot better today. It was good to be around other people and doing normal things."

He smiled warmly at her as he took the seat across from her. "I'm very glad to hear that." With a flick of his wand, he uncorked the wine and poured each of them a glass. "Here's to hoping the rest of it goes as easily," he said as he raised his glass in salute.

She raised hers in return before savoring the wine. "You do have a magnificent wine cellar."

"Thank you."

Before he could say anything more, Katta brought their plates to the table. "Master, Mistress, Katta prepares you a lovely roast chicken." She left as soon as the plates were on the table.

"I don't know how much gossip you heard at work, but from what I was able to discern today, it seems that the favor is slightly in your direction," he said as they began eating.

"I didn't really hear anything. I'm sure they were talking about it, just not while I was around. But I suppose that's good to hear." She wasn't sure if it was good or bad that she hadn't heard anything from her coworkers. It was almost as though they were pretending it wasn't happening.

"It is. While it will have no bearing on your hearing, it will have bearing when you interact with others in the wizarding world, as I presume you have no desire to abandon us for the Muggle one."

She shook her head. "I don't belong there. There has been a lot of change since I went to Hogwarts, and it almost seems foreign to me now."

There was a long silence before he asked, "Do you miss it?" When she didn't answer, he elaborated. "You grew up in the Muggle world with their electronic devices and such. It must have been quite the shock entering the wizarding world where none of that functions and most everything we do use is, by Muggle standards, must seem antiquated. Even our manner of dress is quite different."

"It was a bit of a shock, but I think I was in more shock over being magical. What I can do as a witch far outweighs what Muggle technology can do, though the internet is quite fascinating. The idea that you can have instant access to pretty much anything that exists or is known is just amazing. Of course, there is a lot of disinformation out there, and there is just something about holding a book and that distinct smell that a computer could never replace. Though I will admit that phones do have an advantage over owls in that you can instantaneously get in touch with someone."

"The Floo network allows the same," Lucius replied.

"It does, but it just feels odd sticking your head in the fireplace and intruding on someone." It was a method of communication she still wasn't entirely comfortable with.

"It is more personal than listening to a disembodied voice on a small box," he countered.

"It's a bit disconcerting to see a disembodied head in your fireplace," she retorted. "And what if the caller saw something... untoward."

Lucius grinned at her. "Those raised in the wizarding world tend to be aware of Floo communication, and I imagine would be careful to not do anything compromising before the Floo or to close it before they did."

"You can close a Floo connection?" she asked. It was something Ron had never mentioned.

He chuckled softly. "Indeed you can. Though to do so for more than a few hours, you would need Ministry approval."

"Why is it that when we have a discussion, I keep learning how much I didn't learn at Hogwarts?" She had lately taken to questioning the caliber of education she had received. While most of the students had been raised in the wizarding world, for those who weren't, there were a great many things that no one seemed to think were important, but it really would have been nice to know.

"A failing of those raised in the wizarding world, and our ignorance of the Muggle world," Lucius replied morosely.

"Yet you seem to have a knowledge of the Muggle world," she said, surprised that he had understood a telephone conversation given that Ron had had such a difficult time with it.

"A passing knowledge. From time to time my business requires interaction with the Muggle world." He smiled at her. "I'm surprising you, aren't I?"

"More than I had expected," she admitted. She looked down at her dinner as she could feel her cheeks flushing.

"So, the French Revolution. A very odd subject to suddenly take up."

Hermione tried to think quickly about why she would be interested in that time period. "It came up at lunch, and I realized that it wasn't really something we covered in History of Magic. Most of that focused on British history. When I was young, we vacationed in France frequently, so I've always been interested in French history. I figured you have a rather expansive library and must have something on the subject."

"That I do. My family came from France in the eleventh century. While I no longer have familial ties there, I have spent a great deal of time there over the years."

They spent the rest of the evening discussing their travels in France. Hermione lamented the usual winter skiing trip she had been forced to take, but reveled in recounting some of their summer travels, especially after she had started at Hogwarts. Of course she enjoyed hearing about his travels as they had been to magical parts of France where she had yet to have the opportunity to travel.

After she said goodnight to Lucius, she felt a bit of emptiness. She still wasn't used to the fact that there was no one coming home for the night, or that this wasn't actually her home. Once this was all over and she had put her life back together, she could start looking for someone special.

Shortly before the end of the work day on Tuesday, Hermione went to the lavatory to check her hair in the mirror. It was a lost cause, so she just pulled it back into a ponytail. She took in the rest of her appearance and cleaned a small smudge of soot off her cheek. It wasn't perfect, but she looked presentable.

When the work day was over, she packed up slowly, letting the others leave before her. A few minutes after they were gone, Gilles entered her lab.

"Are you ready?" he asked jauntily. He was dressed in jeans and a button-front shirt.

"Oui, monsieur," she replied jovially, having stuffed her robes into her bag. She'd dressed carefully, choosing a modest skirt and blouse under her work robes so that she wouldn't be inconspicuous either at work or out in the Muggle world.

"Do you have a card for the Tube? It's just too difficult to Apparate around Muggles this time of day," he asked as they walked out of the building.

"I do," she replied as they walked out of the nearly deserted building. "So do you spend a lot of time in Muggle London?" she asked.

"A little. I like to wander around and see the city when I have free time." He led her to the nearby Tube station and to the platform to wait for the train. She thought back to the few times she and Ron had had to travel by Tube and it was such a difference in behavior. To Gilles this was completely normal. To Ron it had been confusing and illogical. Clearly Gilles was used to public transportation, but then she recalled he had mentioned growing up in Paris.

After they got off the train, he took hold of her hand so they didn't get separated in the crush of people as he led her out of the station and to their destination.

Over drinks and dinner, they had a wonderful discussion about the effects of the French Revolution on wizarding France. Even though she had been able to research a little the previous evening, she learned so much talking with Gilles. He never once made her feel ignorant for what she didn't know. She also found it liberating to be out in Muggle London where no one spared her a second glance. Even before the divorce, there was always someone who recognized her or Ron. While they didn't get approached, she still noticed people whispering about the two of them. Here, she was completely anonymous and it felt liberating.

When she noticed it was nearly ten, she excused herself. Gilles had offered to see her home, but she insisted she would be fine. She found a secluded alley and it occurred to her that she had never tried Apparating to the cottage. She knew that Lucius could Apparate there, but she had never thought to ask if she could. She figured if it didn't work, she should still end up on the boundary where she would be able to walk back. Picturing the cottage, she turned in place and was slightly disappointed to find that she was on the edge of the property. It would be about a fifteen minute walk to the cottage, but the evening was pleasant so she didn't entirely mind.

Once in bed, it wasn't long before she was fast asleep.

After work on Wednesday, Hermione sat awaiting Lucius' arrival. Shortly before six, Katta popped before her, her ears slumped over. "Mistress, Katta is sad to reports that Master will not be joining you for dinner. He sends his regrets that business keeps him away."

"Thank you, Katta. Just let me know when dinner is ready." She was disappointed, but there was nothing to be gained by blaming Katta. It was irrational for her to believe that Lucius would drop everything in his life to spend time with her. After all, he was a very successful businessman, and to be successful he had to tend to his business interests first. And it's not like she was anything more than a friend. For all she knew, he was spending a romantic evening with Elsa Schwartz.

Since she had the evening to herself, she decided to dig in to some of the books on the French Revolution that Katta had brought her on Monday. Gilles had mentioned some that were in French, but the only one she had were in English.

"Katta," she said. When the house-elf was by her side, she asked, "Do you know if Mr. Malfoy has any books on the French Revolution written in French?"

Katta's ears dipped. "Katta is sorry, Mistress, but she is not knowing French. None of the house-elves is knowing French."

"That's alright. I was just curious." For a few moments, Hermione considered popping out to the Great Wizarding Library, but she wasn't sure she was ready to be out in the wizarding world yet, even if it was just the library, which had always been her sanctuary. No, she would make do with the English language tomes she had here. There was plenty to keep her occupied for the evening.

After dinner she found herself falling asleep before the fire in the drawing room and finally dragged herself upstairs to bed. She should have just read in bed, but a part of her had hoped that Lucius might stop by when he concluded his business, as irrational as that hope might be.

The next morning when she arrived at work, she saw an envelope on top of her stack of notes.

Hermione,

I apologize for missing dinner last night and for using Katta to deliver the message. I was unavoidably detained on business and that was the only way I would be able to get the message to you in a timely manner. I look forward to joining you for dinner tonight. I will do my best to be there by six.

L

Hermione smiled as she read the letter. She was a bit surprised he hadn't sent it to the cottage, but he must have thought there would be a small chance that she would leave before the owl would arrive. He would know that she would definitely receive it here.

She tucked the note in her pocket for safekeeping before beginning her workday.

Unlike her other days at work this week, time seemed to slow to a crawl. Even lunch did not provide much of a respite. Gilles was conspicuously absent. She reasoned there had been days where she had had to shift her lunch break to accommodate one of her experiments, so it was likely he was doing the same thing.

Finally the day ended. Even though Lucius had said that he wasn't likely to be there until closer to six, she was eager to return to the cottage. Of course she had to wait until most of the others had left. She could have Apparated, but that only took her to the property boundaries and the weather that morning had looked threatening.

When she arrived at the cottage, she quickly changed out of her work robes and checked to see what Katta was preparing for dinner. She paused a moment as she realized she was getting used to having a house-elf around and decided that this weekend, she would do the cooking. Katta was carefully laying noodles in a pan for lasagna. It was a meal that Hermione enjoyed, but rarely had the time to make, especially not with fresh pasta.

Since she had nothing else to do until Lucius arrived, she selected one of the books on the French Revolution and curled up in the parlor to read.

Shortly before six, Lucius arrived. "I hope you saw my note this morning," he said.

Hermione closed her book. "I did. And thank you for sending Katta. I was beginning to wonder."

"Unfortunately something unexpected came up. I won't bore you with the details." He took a deep breath as the aromas from dinner had wafted up to the main floor. "Ah, Katta is making lasagna."

"That's one of my favorite meals," Hermione offered.

"Then I am sure you will enjoy hers. I have dined at some of the finest restaurants in Italy and none of them have served a lasagna to match." Lucius expertly opened the evening's wine and poured it into a decanter he had summoned.

Hermione eyed him consideringly. This most definitely was not the same man who had gotten into a fight with Arthur Weasley. She smiled warmly.

Lucius looked up and returned her smile.

She could feel her pulse racing and turned to put her books away. This was utterly foolish. She most definitely should not be thinking this way about another wizard and most definitely not Lucius Malfoy.

Thankfully, Katta arrived to tell them dinner was served, and they proceeded to the dining room. While they ate, conversation naturally encompassed the French Revolution. "Still reading about the French Revolution?" he asked.

She tried not to blush. "Well, when I asked Katta for books, she brought about twenty over and most of them are quite fascinating."

"I do have some in French if you are interested in a different historical perspective. While you have no doubt noticed that some are translated from the French, I find that you do tend to get a bit of a bias based on the translator, don't you?"

"I... hadn't really thought about it, but I can see how it would happen." She knew that many times words had multiple, similar meanings in another language and that word choice could change the tone of something. "If it's not too much trouble, I wouldn't mind taking a look at those books. I don't think I'm quite ready to brave the library yet."

Lucius took a sip of his wine. "I think that you might be pleasantly surprised at the reception you will receive," he said as he grinned mischievously.

"Oh, really?" she asked. "I thought you were above gossip."

"I never claimed to be above gossip. I merely do not participate nor do I believe everything I hear. In business, information is power, so I like to collect information

whenever I can." He refilled both wine glasses and eyed Hermione appraisingly as the dishes disappeared. Apparently, Katta banished the dirty dishes to the kitchen the same way the Hogwarts house-elves did.

"Now, I hope you will permit me a rematch from the other day's chess match."

"Of course. I look forward to besting you again," she replied, grinning mischievously as she got to her feet and headed towards the drawing room.

He chuckled softly as he followed her. "Such confidence."

A little more than an hour later, Hermione was forced to concede defeat. "Seems you get the victory this time." She was staring at the board replaying the last few moves in her mind, trying to determine where she had made the wrong move.

As though reading her mind, he said, "Seven moves ago you should have moved your king's bishop and not your knight."

"So you knew seven moves ago you were going to win?" She asked, impressed by his prowess.

"I wanted you to see it. It's quite demoralizing when your opponent declares victory before you see it."

"Yes, it does." She recalled that Ron used to do precisely that when she was first learning the game. He seemed to take a special glee in being able to do something better than her and spared her feelings no thought in announcing precisely when she'd made an error.

He glanced at the clock on the mantle. "As enjoyable as this evening has been, I think it's time for both of us to get some rest. I can join you for breakfast on Saturday, though it might be a little later as dinner parties do tend to drag on into the night."

"That's fine. I like to take a bit of a lie in on the weekends. How does nine o'clock sound?" She offered, still feeling a little guilty about the amount of his time she was monopolizing.

He inclined his head. "I'll see you then. And I'll set the books out for Katta to collect tomorrow."

"Thank you. See you Saturday," she said before he departed. Just watching him Disapparate silently made her pulse race. Before he had vanished, she could see the small swirl of the fine wool of his robes as he began to turn in place. She hoped that when this was all over, he would share that little secret with her.

It took her quite some time before her mind was calm enough to allow sleep. She kept thinking back to the evening and all the warm smiles and small gestures he had made, such as brushing his hand against hers or their feet touching beneath the table. She dispelled the notion. No, someone like him would not be interested in someone like her, especially when there was someone out there like Elsa Schwarz. He was just being a friend and any perceived flirting was just that perceived on her account.

Of course, there was also Gilles. The two of them had had an enjoyable evening together. Nothing happened, but he was someone who she had a lot in common with. While they came from different countries, each had traveled extensively in the other's country, and they both came from Muggle families. Not to mention he wasn't bad looking either. She hadn't really noticed it at work, but when they had been out, she had seen him in an entirely different light.

She realized what she was doing and tried to push it out of her mind. While she was separated from Ron, she was still technically married, and she knew that appraising other wizards as a potential partner was not something she should be doing.

Hermione was a little tired at work as she had found sleep difficult to obtain. Her mind had been mulling all the changes in her life and trying to make sense of it, to no avail. Thankfully it didn't look like there was anything difficult for her to do. Of course Harold tended to ensure there was nothing overly taxing for any of them to do on Fridays because he knew fatigue could set in over the course of the week. Most of what they were doing was finalizing their weekly reports on their progress, and making preparations for a new line of research they were getting ready to start on the Dragon Pox treatment.

When it was time for lunch, she sat at her usual table and kept checking the door to see if Gilles would be there today. She smiled when she saw him. After he joined her, she asked, "Have a busy day yesterday?"

"Actually no. I ate something that disagreed with me and spent most of the day stuck at home. I would have much rather been here."

"I can imagine. Glad to see you are feeling better. I never thought I'd say this, but it was rather boring eating lunch by myself."

"I can imagine." He pulled a book out of his bag. "I thought you might like to borrow this since I keep referencing it. Other books go more in detail, but this is a good place to start. It was one of my text books."

She took the book and read the title: *Histoire de France Magique: 1700-1990*. "Thank you. I'll see if I have some time this weekend to look through it."

"Big plans for this weekend?" he asked as he opened his sandwich.

"Nothing special. I was thinking of visiting my parents, though trying to explain this all to them is a bit overwhelming. There's a lot they don't understand." She knew that she had tell them she and Ron were getting divorced at some point, but she had been so busy over the last few weeks that she hadn't found the time to visit them. Yes, she could have visited the previous Sunday, but she still wasn't sure what to say in way of explanation. Although, in all fairness, divorce was common in the Muggle world, and she was sure her parents would understand her reasons, she'd have to explain why it was so difficult to get on in the wizarding world.

He placed his hand on hers. "I understand. I find it difficult to visit my family as we have so little common. I think they prefer that I have moved to London because it's easier for them to make me seem important."

"My parents have decided that I'm a medical researcher. It's the closest that we could come up with," she admitted. Her parents were very proud of her and tried their best to understand her world, but for those without magic, it was nearly incomprehensible, and she had been seeing less of them over the years.

"That's pretty good. I may share that with my parents."

They then continued their discussion on the French Revolution, with Hermione bringing up several points she had read about in the books from Lucius' library. They had a very lively discussion in which Gilles reminded her that by reading English texts, there was likely to be some bias. She looked forward to reading the French point of view.

As lunch was wrapping up, he was relating a humorous anecdote from his History of Magic class. She glanced at the clock on the wall when he finished. "Goodness. Look at the time. I guess it's time to get back to work." She put her lunch containers back in her bag, along with the book Gilles had lent her. The two of them walked out of the lunch room together still laughing about his story.

"Oh, Gilles, that is too funny," she said as she placed her hand on his arm.

"I'm glad I could improve your mood," he replied, smiling warmly at her.

"See you later," she said.

"How about tonight?" Gilles asked.

She considered his request for several second. She didn't have any other plans, and they had had an enjoyable evening earlier in the week. What harm was there in going out for drinks after work? "Sure. I'll meet you at the Tube." She had become more aware of people's perceptions and thought it best if they not be seen leaving together.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 of 29

Lucius catches the tail end of Hermione's conversation and begins to wonder if perhaps he is moving too cautiously.

On Thursday the paperwork was finally filed with the Wizengamot, though it was filed as a contested divorce since Weasley had refused to sign the documents. That had not surprised Lucius in the least. He noticed on Friday morning that the Weasley divorce was scheduled for two weeks from the following Tuesday. It seemed like an interminably long time, but the Wizengamot docket was quite full with other pending cases to attend to business contracts, magical patent disputes, various criminal hearings, etcetera.

But now that the date was set, and as long as the hearing resolved quickly, he knew that in roughly two months, Hermione would be a free witch. He saw very little that could interfere with the divorce or any cause for the Wizengamot to rule against her.

Checking the clock, he saw that it was nearly one o'clock. The lunch break would be ending, and this would be a good time to inform Hermione when her hearing was scheduled. He knew that Reg would send her the information by owl, but this was news he wanted to deliver in person, especially since he would not be seeing her this evening.

When he arrived at the Potions Research Division, he casually strolled towards the lunch room. He wanted this to look like a random encounter, not something he had planned. He froze when he glanced in the room and saw Hermione sitting at a table with a rather handsome wizard who appeared to be her age. She was laughing at something he had said and reached her hand out to touch his arm in a very familiar way. Lucius could feel a tightness in his chest as he watched the two of them flirt with each other.

Rather than stand in the doorway and draw attention to himself, he continued down the hall and into one of the empty conference rooms. He leaned against the table, his hands squeezing the edge, and he closed his eyes to try to regain emotional control. Had he waited too long to make his feelings clear? Was this younger wizard his rival for her affection? She had not mentioned anyone else, but why would she? If this wizard was special to her, she would be careful not to let anyone know for the same reason that he was keeping his feelings for her concealed.

He was disturbed from his reverie when he heard her voice.

"Oh, Gilles, that is too funny," she said in French.

"I'm glad I could improve your mood," he replied.

"See you later," she said.

"How about tonight?" Gilles asked.

Lucius held his breath as he waited for her reply.

After several long seconds, Hermione replied. "Sure. I'll meet you at the Tube."

Lucius instantly regretted his dinner engagement at the Greengrasses. If he'd only cleared more time in his schedule dared to spend more of his time with her she'd be in his company and there would not be this other wizard to compete against. Her tone and actions clearly spoke to the fact they were more than merely colleagues. Obviously they were close enough for her to use his first name. How close he could only presume, but close enough for him to know she'd needed cheering. Had she confided in him? Was this other wizard doing as he was, getting close to her and hoping to win her affections? The fact their conversation had been in French meant any of their coworkers who happened to overhear them were less likely to know what they were saying; that alone set him on edge.

He knew she would be walking by the conference room shortly, and he schooled his expression before walking out of the room. He stepped from the room, graciously allowing two witches carrying research files pass him, and closed the door behind him silently. He looked up and tried to appear as if seeing her was completely coincidental. "Ah, Hermione, the witch I was coming to see next. Do you have a moment?"

She glanced around her, watching the withes leave and replied, "Of course, Mr. Malfoy." She then followed him into the conference room across the hall.

"I thought you might like to know that your hearing has been scheduled for two weeks from next Tuesday. I know that Reg will send you an owl, but I thought it might make your afternoon more enjoyable given how much this has weighed on your mind."

She smiled at him. "Thank you. I do appreciate you letting me know."

He quickly tried to determine some way to divine her plans for the evening, to confirm what he had overheard. "And you'll be all right this evening?"

"Oh, I'll be fine. I was always a bit of a homebody, so going out on Fridays has never been my thing. Besides, I have a new stack of books waiting for me."

He did his best to smile at her, hearing the uncertainty in her voice. "Of course. I'll see you tomorrow morning for breakfast?"

"I look forward to it. Maybe we can go best two out of three in chess?" she offered cheerfully.

"I hope for a thrilling match," he replied.

She paused a moment before turning from the conference room to head up the stairs to her lab.

Lucius watched her go and wondered if he would lose her before she knew he was interested in her.

Lucius joined Hermione on Saturday for breakfast, glad that he had begged out of the hunt. While they ate, he tried to think of a way to divine what she had done the previous evening. He had already learned from the warding on the property that recorded all non-family Apparitions that she had come home at a reasonable hour for a

Friday night date. He wondered how truthful she would be. At least she was spending the morning with him and not with her coworker; though he did wonder if she felt obliged because he had asked and this was his cottage.

"So how was your dinner party?" she asked as she poured tea.

"Your usual socializing with the elite. A lot of conversation about absolutely nothing of value, but it is necessary for me to appear in public from time to time. And events like this are surprisingly good for business. After the libations have been flowing freely, tongues are loosened and you can learn a lot." He chuckled. He was always careful about how much he drank at social events so he did not become one of those with a loose tongue.

"I bet," she said before taking a bite of her eggs.

"And how about your evening?" he asked innocently, pleased that she had provided him the perfect opportunity.

"Oh, nothing special. I decided to head out into Muggle London last night. I just wasn't in the mood for reading. I grabbed a bite to eat and then hit the cinema. I haven't done that in ages."

He didn't like the fact she was hiding the truth from him or more specifically that she was hiding that she had met with Gilles. "Sounds rather uneventful," he replied. He could tell. There was truth in her statement, but not the entire truth. Deception was something to which she was clearly ill-suited and unaccustomed.

"It was, but it was nice to be out and about, but honestly I would have rather been at the library."

He looked into her eyes, trying to decipher the meaning of her words, if there was a subtext there. He smiled softly at her before returning his attention to his breakfast, trying to decide what his next move should be. Gilles had entered an unknown variable to his plan.

After they finished eating and Lucius was finishing his second cup of tea, they lapsed into a somewhat uncomfortable silence.

Finally Hermione broke the silence by asking, "Lucius, what am I to you?"

"I beg your pardon?" he asked, taken aback by her question. He wondered if she suspected his true feelings for her. He had tried to hide them, to remain nothing more than a good friend.

"What am I to you?" she asked again and took a sip of her tea.

"That is a very fascinating question," he replied evasively before sipping his tea. He could not admit his true feelings now, and even if he could, he wanted to know what the nature of her relationship with Gilles was so that he did not embarrass himself. Both Connor and Delilah had asked him if he hadn't been imagining her feelings, and now he found himself wondering the same thing.

"I thought so, which is why I am interested in your answer." She set her cup down and crossed her arms, letting him know that she was willing to wait.

He tried to hold his teacup as casually as possible. "You are a friend; ever since our first encounter in the library, I have come to know you and I find that I truly enjoy your company. Have I given you reason to think otherwise?" he asked, turning the tables on her.

"No, but I am curious," she probed.

"And what prompted this curiosity?" he asked cautiously, trying to get to the source of this inquiry.

"Ron seems to think that there is someone else in my life," she finally admitted.

"Is there?" he asked, hoping his voice sounded neutral. He still could not get the vision of her and Gilles flirting at lunch from his mind.

"Of course not! I'm not that sort of person," she replied defensively, his question clearly insulting her. "I mean I've made some acquaintances at work, and a few that I might call a friend, but they are just work friends, people I eat lunch with and such."

"Then why did you ask that question?" he asked pointedly, trying to hide his irritation that she was concealing her relationship with Gilles from him.

"Well," she started hesitantly, "it's just that we seem to spend a lot of time together and most of that talking about me and not much about you. Not to mention the fact that we have not really known each other for all that long."

"Ah, well... You see, that is because I am used to my life being in the public domain. I presumed that if you had questions you would ask them," he replied diplomatically.

"I guess I've always wondered why you didn't have anyone else in your life. I mean, you are quite the eligible bachelor," she replied sheepishly, refreshing her tea in order to avoid meeting his eyes.

He took her looking away as a good sign that she might have feelings for him and gave her a quick, smug smile. "Thank you for the compliment," he said with a small nod of his head.

"But there's no one?" she prodded.

He gave her a sad smile. "Not at the moment." At least no one who knew what her place in his heart was.

She paused a moment before asking, "Not even Elsa Schwartz?"

"I thought you of all people would realize that you should not believe everything you read," he replied sagely. He was well aware that the media, and Elsa, wanted there to be something between the two of them.

Her expression took on a look of sadness. "I would have thought there would be no shortage of witches interested in you."

He sipped his tea again. "There has been interest, but not of the kind I'd prefer." He lowered his cup. "Most of those witches are interested in me only because they want to be a Malfoy and have access to my money. That's not the sort of witch I want."

"Surely you could pursue any witch, and she would be flattered," Hermione observed.

"That is probably true. Perhaps I just have not yet found the proper witch. Narcissa was very special," he replied sadly, setting his teacup down.

Hermione paused as she reflected upon his words. She reached across the table to give his hand a reassuring touch. "That she was. I'm sorry to have brought up such a painful memory."

He took hold of her hand, savoring its feel. "It's not painful. I have long since accepted her loss, but as I'm sure you can imagine, I will always miss her." He looked into her eyes a few moments before releasing her hand. "Now, perhaps we can find a happier subject to discuss?" he offered.

She sighed. "I wish, but Ron is really resistant to the whole idea of divorce. By contesting it, it's only going to get uglier."

"That's not surprising. I did warn you that it was rare, and it's likely his family is taking this as an affront, especially considering you're divorcing him. Pardon me for saying, but your magical years have also been in the public domain, and his association with you and Mr. Potter greatly improved his and his family's social standing. Therefore they will feel the stigma keenly, as would you without Reg's expertise." *And mine*, although he wasn't ready to tell her that.

"I think that's why he's started with the accusation that there's someone else. Even though he has to know that we've been having trouble for some time. It wasn't like this came from nowhere." She sighed. "It just makes me wish that we had waited until longer after the war before getting married, gotten to know each other better. Everything was just moving so quickly, and I felt rushed to commit. Everyone seemed to have marriage fever. I didn't feel that way at the time, but later I did."

She looked up at him after a pause. "This isn't any happier, is it?"

He chuckled softly. "I dare say that it's not." He dabbed his lips with his napkin. "Perhaps we can find something better to discuss over a game of chess?"

"Perhaps we can," she said as she laid her napkin beside her plate before rising to her feet. "There is something I'm wondering, did you let me win that first match?" she asked as they walked towards the parlor where the chess set was kept.

"Would I do that?" he asked innocently. He had, in fact, let her win so that he could get a good sense of her manner of play. Defeating her too quickly would have led to her being demoralized, and she would likely have not been amenable to a rematch. And he had tempered his play in the second match to prolong the game. Chess was not something played merely to win it was an excellent way to learn about someone.

"I don't know; would you?" she asked mischievously.

"To do something like that would be very... Slytherin," he teased as he opened his box of chess pieces.

"Indeed it would," she replied, flashing him a playful grin as she let her pieces take their places on the board.

"To show you how much of a gentleman I am, I shall let you start."

As they played, Lucius decided to engage her in conversation about the movie she had seen the previous evening, hoping she might let something slip. "So what did you see at the cinema?" he asked casually, then instructed his first pawn to move forward.

"Oh, just a guilty pleasure from my youth, *La Belle et la bête*. It was something I remember seeing with my parents, and I couldn't resist."

"*Beauty and the Beast*," Lucius translated automatically. "What is it about?" Even though she said it was a movie she had loved in her youth, he didn't like the idea that it was a French film she had gone to see.

Hermione's looked up from the board. "You mean you don't know?"

"Just as I am sure you had no knowledge of Wizarding tales when you went to Hogwarts, I have had very little exposure to the Muggle variety."

Over the course of the next twenty minutes, Hermione did her best to recount the basic plot of movie while trying to concentrate on her game. Lucius was waiting to see if she would slip that she had not attended the film alone.

Hermione finished, "I hope that made some sense. I'm afraid I'm not very good at explaining a movie to someone who hasn't seen it."

"Well, since you recommend it so highly, perhaps I will have to see it for myself." He instructed his queen to across the board to protect his knight and set up her rook.

"You would go to a Muggle cinema?" Hermione asked, forgetting to hide her shock.

He grinned and chuckled softly. "I have seen a few movies, though it is not something I make a habit of doing. For the most part I don't see the appeal." He had her off guard, and if she were going to let something slip, this would be when it would happen. He just needed to steer the conversation back to her evening. "So where did you enjoy dinner before the cinema?"

"Oh, no place special. Just a nearby pub. Pubs just seem to do fish and chips better than at home." She turned her attention back to the game and told her king to castle to provide it with more protection.

Lucius studied the board trying to determine how much longer he would prolong the match. At least they had dined someplace casual. She seemed to be sticking as close to the truth as possible. Finally he moved his rook. In six moves he should have her in checkmate unless she did something utterly irrational. "A favorite meal of yours?"

She shrugged. "Comfort food. Sometimes you just feel like a greasy helping of fish and chips."

"I'll take your word on that," he replied as he watched her studying the board. He waited in silence for her to make her move.

Finally she sacrificed her bishop to take his rook. Even though he knew that he would have his knight move next, he took his time, not wanting to discourage her. Once his knight was in place and she evaluated the board, she'd realize what the endgame would be.

As he'd predicted, she flashed him a mischievous grin and reached over and tipped her king over. "It seems you have taken the best two out of three, though it was hardly fair, getting me all distracted."

He drew his wand to repair his conquered pieces. "I assure you, it was nothing more than idle curiosity. If you wish, we can play the next match in silence."

"I don't mind the conversation. I rather enjoy it. Though I do think the rematch can wait." She did the same, only repairing each piece individually and gently returning them to their box. Looking out the window, she said, "It's a shame the weather seems to have turned. I was hoping to enjoy the gardens some this weekend."

"Perhaps the weather will clear for tomorrow," he offered, trying to find some way to improve her mood.

"Maybe. Though I was thinking I should finally explain everything to my parents. I've put it off long enough. I just know how much they like Ron and his parents. I think they find Mr. Weasley's curiosity about Muggle life a bit charming." She smiled sadly as she recalled how Arthur would always single her father out at family gatherings to ask questions about motor cars and electric appliances and such.

"I'm sure they will understand. After all, surely they cannot be blind to the tension you have had in your life."

"Well, we don't get together all that often. I just live in a different world from them and we've drifted apart. I mean, I write them and call from time to time, but we don't have a whole lot in common anymore."

Lucius could understand that. As she came from a Muggle family, he knew that due to the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy that they would have to be excluded from a large portion of her life. They had interacted briefly with the wizarding world, taking Hermione school shopping in Diagon Alley and taking her to the Hogwarts Express, but he knew that would be the extent their involvement. Even though her family knew her to be magical, she would still have been prevented from doing magic while home on holidays. "I understand. My father was a very distant and formal man; we seldom interacted." He presumed that by now she knew enough of his family's history that he would not have to elaborate. After all, he had not had much in common with his father and most of their interaction had been of a business nature or providing advice on how Draco should be raised advice he abandoned after the war. He and Draco were much closer now than they had ever been, and Lucius felt there was nothing wrong with lavishing attention upon Scorpius.

"I can imagine," she replied softly. After a few moments silence, she rose to put the box of chess pieces on a shelf.

Lucius found himself in a strange position of not knowing what to say. Normally he could steer a conversation to where he wanted it to go, but he found himself at an utter loss on how to proceed. There was so much he wanted to say to her, to ask her, but he knew that it would not be appropriate.

Finally he rose and deposited his box of chess pieces next to hers. "I'm sure your parents will be quite understanding of your situation." He turned to face her. "Now if you will excuse me, I have business to attend to."

"Of course. See you next week?"

"I should be free on Monday if you have no plans." He watched her expectantly.

She smiled warmly at him, alleviating his concerns. "See you Monday for dinner, and I might be ready for a rematch."

He returned her smile. "I'll see you Monday." He then walked to the foyer and Disappeared.

Once back at his manor, he had to ponder the new mystery before him. She had asked about her place in his life, yet she was also keeping her relationship with Gilles from him. If it was as she said, he was merely a coworker, but if that was the case why would she not mention that she had spent Friday with a coworker? Did she fear he might dig deeper into what she had said?

He wandered the empty halls for some time before he felt ready to turn in for the night.

Since this particular Sunday was unusually quiet at the inn, Draco had decided it would be the perfect time to visit Delilah. She had been delighted to hear from Draco and was ecstatic at the promise of a visit. Lucius felt a bit guilty about not spending time with Hermione. Her mood had still been somewhat morose when he had left her the previous afternoon, but he knew that she would be spending the day with her parents. Though given the fact they would be talking about her marriage falling apart, he doubted that would improve her mood.

Lucius pushed thoughts of Hermione from his mind as he and Draco waited in the lobby for Astoria and Scorpius. They would be taking the Floo to Genoa and Apparating from there. Even Malfoys had to obey rules governing international travel, and his international travel was closely monitored by the International Magical Travel Corporation.

After Astoria came down the stairs, dressed in appropriately plain robes, she carefully set Scorpius on his feet. Scorpius grinned and stomped his way to Lucius once he had his balance, waving his arms and saying, "Paw-paw!"

Lucius caught Scorpius just as the boy lost his balance and began falling forward, pulling his grandson up into his arms. "Is my big boy ready to meet his aunty?"

"I think we're all ready," Draco replied, dressed in his most modest attire.

"Astoria, would you..." Lucius began as he tried to hand Scorpius to his mother, but the boy held very tight to Lucius.

She smiled. "It seems he wants to go with Paw-paw today."

Draco went through the Floo first, followed by Astoria and finally Lucius and Scorpius. Lucius cradled the boy protectively in his arms, so that the whirl of Floo-ports would not make the toddler ill or he'd be bumped accidentally. Once they arrived at Caffé Rinaldo, Lucius gave a quick flick of his wand to clean the soot off himself and Scorpius and to ensure that any regurgitation was eliminated from his person. They then went outside to Apparate to Delilah's farm.

Walking down the road towards the farm, Draco remarked, "Quite a difference from the manor, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is, but Delilah is very happy with her life. As she has not yet told Vittorio about our family's wealth, it would be best to not mention the manor or anything of that nature." He knew it was a secret that could not be kept indefinitely, but it was not his to share.

"I understand, Father."

"Did she say why she hasn't mentioned it?" Astoria asked curiously.

"Because it had no bearing on her new life after she was exiled. I do hope that will change soon and that she can be convinced to visit us in Britain."

They turned through the gate into the farm, and it wasn't long before Delilah and Vittorio met them.

Delilah greeted Lucius warmly with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Lucius, so good to see you again, and this must be Scorpius." She gave the tyke in Lucius' arm a warm smile, and the boy shyly buried his face on Lucius' shoulder. Delilah embraced Draco next before moving back to arm's length and appraising him. "Draco, you have grown into such a handsome young man."

Lucius indicated to his daughter-in-law. "Delilah, Vittorio, this is Astoria, Draco's wife."

Vittorio greeted both Draco and Lucius with a firm handshake and hugged Astoria before kissing both her cheeks. "Buongiorno and welcome to our home."

Delilah gave Astoria a gentle hug. "So wonderful to meet you. Since the sun is shining, we'll have refreshments out back."

Once they were settled in the back garden, Scorpius wanted to get down and start exploring. Lucius decided to follow the youngster and give Astoria and Draco some time with Delilah. Soon Vittorio brought over a ball and joined the two of them. The two men enjoyed rolling the ball at Scorpius and trying to get him to return the ball.

It was a very enjoyable afternoon and evening. Everyone doted on Scorpius, who reveled in the attention. It was a wonderful and comfortable family gathering.

As they were finishing dinner, Scorpius fell asleep in his mother's arms. Lucius knew they should be getting home soon. He turned to his sister. "Delilah, you really should come visit. I'd love for you and Vittorio to come see my home."

"Lucius," she began to protest.

"I swear to you it will be kept quiet," Lucius said, cutting off her protest. "You need to come to terms with the fact that he is gone and everything has changed. It's not his home anymore. I'd never ask you to move back to Britain since you have built your family life here, but there is much I'd like to show you. And it's not as though you would have to make the trip this upcoming weekend, but it would be wonderful for you to visit before the year is out, perhaps even spend part of the holiday season there," he said hopefully.

"I'll think about it," she finally replied. "I'll have to talk with Vittorio before making any decisions." She glanced over at her husband who was trying to have a conversation with Draco and Astoria, neither of whom knew much Italian. "I daresay he'll be quite shocked."

"I'm sure that he will, but you really should tell him. It's only a matter of time before it either slips out or my business makes the news here in Italy."

She leaned back in her chair and sighed. "I know. I just spent so long distancing myself from being a Malfoy. And I know that you have changed what that means and that I shouldn't be ashamed of it anymore." She sat up straight in her chair. "No time like the present, is there?" She turned her attention to Draco and Astoria. "Draco, I hope

you and Astoria can forgive your father and I for having a discussion in Italian, but there is something we want Vittorio to understand."

"It's no problem. In fact, we should be getting home to put Scorpius to bed." He rose to his feet and hugged Delilah. "Thank you to you both for your hospitality and hopefully we can have many more gatherings." He then shook Vittorio's hand before taking his sleeping son from Astoria so she could say her farewells.

Once Draco and his family were gone, Lucius, Delilah and Vittorio sat around the table. Lucius gave Delilah's hand a reassuring squeeze.

"Vittorio, I know that I have not told you much about my family. There was no need to because I never thought that they would be a part of my life again. Now that they are, there is something you need to know. Lucius is a very prominent businessman."

Lucius remained impassive. He knew that discussing one's wealth was a bit of social taboo.

"So you own a company?" Vittorio asked Lucius.

"Many companies. My business interests span most aspects of wizarding life," Lucius admitted, trying to put as much humility in his voice as he could.

Vittorio sat in silence as he processed this information. "So this is why you said little about your work? To not make me uncomfortable?"

Delilah answered, "It was my decision, tesero. My news to tell you. It didn't matter what my family was when we met as I had been disowned. And now, well, it's not easy to bring up in conversation that your brother is one of the wealthiest wizards in Britain."

Vittorio's eyes widened in shock. He had clearly assumed that Lucius was merely well off, not excessively wealthy.

"We wanted you to know because I would someday soon like to have your family come visit in Britain. The family home is a large and rather imposing manor," Lucius said.

Vittorio eyed him appraisingly. "You do not seem like other wealthy wizards I have met. Most would have looked at our humble home with disdain."

Lucius smiled wanly. "I have been through much in my life which has changed me and changed my perspective. And I see how happy my sister is here and that brings me happiness. I will leave the two of you to talk. I'll send you an owl later this week."

Lucius rose and said his farewells. As he walked around the house towards the lane, he could hear Delilah and Vittorio discussing this new revelation. He hoped that it would not change the relationship he had with them too much.

A/N: As always many thanks to my beta reader beawesley2 and to all the lovely readers who have left their reviews. Hopefully the next chapter will be out in the first half of next week. Summer vacation for kids can sideline a lot of good intentions. :) Thanks for your patience.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 of 29

Hermione comes to grips with her new life and inadvertently learns something quite fascinating about the Malfoy family and the history of the wizarding world.

After Lucius left on Saturday, Hermione felt that something had strained their relationship, but she had no idea what it was. She wondered if it had anything to do with her asking what her place in his life was. She thought it a valid question. After all, she knew that the two of them had been spending a great deal of time together, especially since she had withdrawn from wizarding society. Well, ever since she'd decided to work for him, it seemed. And he was so supportive, always had the most reasonable advice, she'd truly come to trust him and value his friendship, although the thought of something more was appealing.

The last couple of weeks, she had been feeling the need to get out more. She had never felt that way when it was her and Ron. Of course most of their getting out had involved going to family gatherings where she would be scrutinized for her lack of offspring, so she had actually preferred staying in. Well, that was not entirely true. She preferred spending time at the library, but she realized that wasn't really healthy. The urge to get out and do something had been growing the longer it had been denied to her. She still wasn't sure about going out in the wizarding world, but she had thoroughly enjoyed her evenings out with Gilles. That was what evenings out with a friend should be: good food and good conversation.

This was where she was conflicted. A part of her wanted to reach out to Gilles, to see if he was busy this evening, but she thought it was rather presumptuous to ask someone to get together on a Saturday night at the last minute. Even though their relationship was strictly platonic, a part of her felt that it could easily become something more. Not that she was interested in something more at the moment. But she found she wasn't entirely ruling it out. Conversation with him was easy, and even though they came from different countries, they had an appreciation and understanding of each other's cultures. Not to mention the fact they both came from Muggle families.

Despite that, meeting for drinks or even dinner after work was one thing. Going out together on a Saturday sent a message that she wasn't sure she wanted to send at the moment.

Then there was the enigma of Lucius Malfoy. She found herself drawn to him in a way she could not explain. He had been the perfect gentleman ever since they bumped into each other in library. While he had shown her every courtesy, he had done nothing to indicate that he saw her as nothing more than a friend, which is why she had asked him about the nature of their friendship. Of course, if he desired something more than friendship, she had known that he would never tell her that, but she had hoped that perhaps his body language might give something away.

It hadn't. Of course he had years of experience at being deceptive while under Voldemort's scrutiny, so she hadn't been entirely surprised, but it left her precisely where she had been before she asked the question: wondering where she stood with Lucius Malfoy.

She had been inwardly pleased when he had admitted that there was no special witch in his life, though it had also saddened her a bit.

What if he did have feelings for her? He was quite literally old enough to be her father, but that never seemed to matter. Talking with him never felt like having a conversation with any of her uncles, who still treated her like she was ten years old. Even some of the older members of the Order still didn't see her as the adult witch she was. Lucius on the other hand always treated her as an equal. He seemed to recognize a maturity in her that those who should have been closest to her still did not see.

Did that really mean anything? She wasn't sure. For now she was inclined to believe that being cooped away from everyone and everything she had grown accustomed to over the last five years of living in wizarding society was adding her brain.

It was time to take hold of her life and show them all that she didn't care one whit what they thought of her. She was going to live her life the way she wanted to. They could gossip all they wanted.

Not long after lunch the rain abated, and Hermione walked into the village and used the phone to call her parents. They sounded happy to hear from her and were pleased when she said she would like to come over for Sunday dinner. After talking briefly with them, she was still feeling a little nervous, but less so than she had before the phone call.

When she returned to the cottage, she took a long walk along the gravel paths until she saw rain starting to threaten again.

Once back inside, she decided to peruse the library a little more closely since she wasn't in the mood to read any more about the French Revolution. It was an interesting collection of books. She was surprised to see that there were several shelves of old gold-tooled leather bound books, possibly dating back hundreds of years. There were two shelves of books with leather covers decorated with medieval stamps and tool work instead of titles, depicting magical animals, plants and figures. She opened one with snapweed and dragon's tongue carved into the leather, smiling at the lovely illustrations of the various magical herbs and plants on the vellum pages. Hermione knew that very few books survive a hundred or more years without stains, bumps, foxing and tears, but these books were all in really good condition. She set the book aside and checked the next set of shelves. There were some of the more common spell books, a few on British wizarding history, and a number of novels but the biggest surprise was finding the Muggle classics such as Shakespeare, Dickens, Milton and Chaucer among the collection.

She bent down to see what was on one of the bottom shelves as none of the books had titles. As she reached for one of the books, she momentarily paused, knowing that some titleless books tended to have protective charms or curses on them. She reasoned that Lucius knew of her love of books and would have warned her if there was anything dangerous. Not to mention the fact that Aurors had likely been through this cottage just as they had carefully examined every square inch of the manor. She pulled one of the books from the middle of the shelf out to read it.

Opening it she saw that it was hand written and seemed to be some sort of historical record about the goings on at the cottage. The dates showed that it came from the mid-1700s. There were accounts of various visitors, and she recognized many family names. There were also list of supplies purchased and commodities sold, not to mention artwork acquired or sold.

After she had finished flipping through the book, she placed it back on the shelf and decided to take a look at the book on the far left, reasoning that it would be the oldest. Perhaps it would have some accounting of when the cottage was built.

The writing in this book was more ornate than the previous, though she did notice the first page indicated the records within would cover the time period from 1521-1551. She almost dropped the book. Even though she has suspected that it would be about that old, it was still difficult for her to fathom holding a book such as this in her hands. It was obviously magically fortified since it did not seem in any way fragile.

She curled up in a chair to see what she could learn about the Malfoy family. The first several pages were difficult for her to read, but by the time she was twenty pages in, she had grown accustomed to the handwriting of the author. Like the other book, there were a lot of mundane facts you would find about a working estate. There were a few family names that she recognized, but what really stood out for her was the use of titles. Granted their education at Hogwarts with regards to history had not been the best, but she could not ever recall Professor Binns talking about a witch or wizard and using a title.

As she turned the page, a name immediately caught her attention: Regis Henry VIII. She looked more closely at the page and even flipped back to the previous one, which she had been casually skimming.

After rereading it three times, there was no doubt that in 1523 King Henry VIII of England had been an honored guest at this house. She found herself wishing she had access to a computer. She felt sure that the various titled names she had read in the previous pages belonged to Muggle nobility.

Realizing that she was visiting her parents the next day, she grabbed parchment and quill and began copying down names and dates. It just seemed so absurd that the Malfoys would be hosting Muggles.

There had been one other mention of Henry VIII visiting in 1532. Given what she knew about the Tudor period of history, she was not surprised there were no further mentions of royal visits until the late 1500s when the turmoil ended and Elizabeth I became queen. Both James I and Charles I had visited multiple times during their reigns.

The most surprising thing she had read though was that Henry VIII had named Robert Malfoy Earl of Westbrook. That was something else she had had to read several times to make sure she wasn't hallucinating. All along she had thought that the Malfoys had been taught pureblood superiority for centuries, that that was all they knew, but here she had more than a hundred years of records showing that the Malfoys had easily socialized with Muggles.

She had tried not to be rude when Katta had insisted that Hermione needed to put down her work and eat dinner, but she had become so immersed in her reading and hadn't wanted to be disturbed.

Absentmindedly, she wondered if the local historical society in Hereford would have any records. Of course, she also realized that it was highly unlikely that they would allow her to examine records that old since she had no credentials. Oh, she could Confound the archivist, but she didn't feel right doing something like that.

After 1654 there had been fewer mentions of visitors, and the entries became more mundane. Hermione recalled that Lucius had mentioned that the manor was built in the mid-1600s, so she presumed the seat of family influence had gone with it. The younger son and his descendants would not have been influential enough to warrant a royal visit.

It was very late when she finally turned in. As she lay in the bed, trying to get comfortable, she decided she would see what the internet turned up at her parents' house. It might provide an interesting dinner conversation with Lucius on Monday. She presumed that since he knew so much about his family's history, that he had to be aware of their socializing with Muggles.

Late Sunday morning she decided that she had stalled long enough and Apparated to secluded alleyway near her parents' home. She walked down the family sidewalk and up the path to the front door, still amazed at how normal everything seemed. It was comforting since everything else in her life had been turned upside-down in recent weeks.

Even though it was her childhood home, she still rang the bell and waited for her mother to answer. "Hi, Mum," she said trying to sound cheerful.

"Where's Ron?" her mother asked.

"He's not coming," she replied simply, not wanting to get into her marital discord before she even walked through the door.

"So sorry to hear that. Is he busy at work?" Eleanor asked, opening the door wider to let her in.

Hermione stepped through the door and walked towards the lounge. "No, Mum. It's a bit more complicated than that."

"What's complicated," Andrew asked as his wife and daughter entered the lounge.

Hermione took the chair while her parents sat on the sofa. She took a deep breath. "Ron and I have decided to part ways. It... wasn't working between us."

Shock crossed both her parents' faces. Eleanor reached over and gently coaxed Hermione to sit beside her on the sofa before wrapping her arms around her daughter. "I'm so sorry to hear that."

Hermione waited for her parents to say something, anything, but they were clearly letting her tell them in her own time. She recounted the difficulties she and Ron had been having over the last year and how she finally came to the realization that they were in different places in their lives and it just wasn't going to work out.

Her parents offered her nothing but support, reassuring her that it wasn't her fault. Even though she logically knew that, it felt good to hear her parents telling her the same thing.

Hermione finally pulled back from her mother. "And to make matters worse, for lack of a better term, Ron is conducting a smear campaign. I had hoped we could just quietly part ways, but he decided to try to make a big deal out of this, make me look like a villain. I've been hiding out for the last week."

"You know you could have come here," Eleanor said.

Hermione looked at her hands as she shook her head. "I thought about it, but given the initial outrage, I thought it best to keep you out of this. Divorce isn't very common in the wizarding world, and Ron and I are rather well known, which has probably made it worse. There's so much that I didn't know, and apparently still don't know, about being a witch. But I have a good solicitor now, and he's confident that this will all work out in the end. My hearing is next Tuesday."

"Did you need us to be there for support?" Andrew asked.

Hermione smiled at her father. "I appreciate the offer, but I think it for the best if you aren't. I have good friend who has been helping me through all this. I'll be fine. I just want it to be over."

"Anyone we know?" her mother asked.

Hermione was momentarily caught off guard. Her parents technically did know who her friend was, but they did not know who he had become. "No. As much as I would love for it to be Harry or Ginny, I've been limiting my contact with our mutual friends, just to make sure nothing comes of that."

"That would explain why I haven't heard back from Arthur. We've been corresponding about all things Muggle for years. Every week or so I normally get a new letter from him full of interesting questions," Andrew explained. "It's been a great deal of fun trying to explain all the things we take for granted. Then, recently, the letters just stopped."

"Maybe when this is all over he'll start writing to you again." Hermione had a hard time believing this would permanently sour Arthur's relationship with her father he just loved all things Muggle far too much, and knew that her father liked and respected Arthur.

Eleanor checked the clock on the mantle. "Well, the roast should be just about done, so why don't we go eat and see if we can find something more pleasant to talk about." She rose to her feet and waited for everyone to follow her. "Your father and I were considering skiing over the holidays. I don't suppose you would fancy joining us?"

"I think I'll pass. You know I was never much for skiing." She had skived off the ski trip her parents had taken while she was Hogwarts.

"Are you sure? I hate to think of you spending the holidays alone."

"I'll figure something out. I have a few friends who aren't all that close to their families and maybe we'll get together. And hopefully I'll be on speaking terms with Harry, so I'm sure I won't be alone. I know you and Dad don't get much time off and this is something you love. We'll get together when you get back."

"If you're sure..."

"I'm sure, Mum. You and dad have a great time."

Hermione enjoyed the rest of the afternoon and into the evening with her parents. They filled her in on what her various relations were doing. Her Aunt Evelyn was continuing her world travels and had sent a series of post cards from across the United States over the last few months. Hermione grew wistful at the thoughts of world travel, but she knew that was not an option for the foreseeable future. Other than the trip to bring her parents back from Australia, the only time Hermione had left Britain since a family vacation while at Hogwarts was when she went to the Merlin Resort. She delighted in telling her parents all about that trip and how marvelous the wizarding resort had been.

She asked her parents about using their computer for a research project and the two of them smiled at each other, knowing their daughter was always looking to learn something.

"Of course, dear," her mother replied. "It's a bit of a shame you can't get a computer to work in a magical residence, isn't it?"

"It is. I'll probably be thirty minutes, an hour at most. You can drag me away then," she told them, knowing that she could easily get lost in reading.

"We'll take a walk and make sure we drag you back to real life in an hour," Andrew said and then laced his fingers in Eleanor's.

Hermione was vaguely aware of the door closing a few minutes later, but she already had her parchment and quill next to the computer and was typing the first name into google.

It only took Hermione about thirty minutes to go through the list of names she had. Most came up and were indeed Muggle nobility. A few there were no record of, just as there was no record of any Earl of Westbrook. She could only presume that those other names belonged to wizard nobility, even though no wizard she had heard of used a title.

She was both intrigued and a bit upset that there was clearly a segment of wizarding history of which she still remained completely ignorant. The only logical conclusion being that the cessation of titles was part of the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy, but she didn't know how to verify that speculation. The fact that wizard families once held titles was not anything they had learned about in school. Short of a trip to the Library, which she knew wasn't open on Sunday, Lucius would be her best source of information.

When her parents returned from their walk, they found her flipping through game shows on the telly, and she turned it off to spend some time with them before she left. They asked her what she had been researching. She thought it best not to mention the fact she'd discovered that wizards once held noble titles, and instead told them how she had been exploring and found an old abandoned country home and that she was looking for information about it. While not entirely the truth, it was close enough to satisfy their curiosity without her giving away too much information about events in her life. Thankfully, her father didn't press her further about the house and asked about her work. When she'd excitedly told them she was now working on Potions' research, her parents were actually delighted that she was pursuing work in the medical field, pleased that she found a job she liked.

When she finally returned to Webtree Hall, she was feeling better. She knew that divorcing Ron was the right thing to do, and her self-doubt was gone. For a few hours she had been able to put all her troubles from her mind and experience a level of normalcy.

For the first time in weeks, she had no trouble falling asleep.

Hermione started the work week feeling much more optimistic than she had the previous week. No new awful things had been published in the *Daily Prophet*. In fact, she had even seen an editorial article lauding her for her independence. But there was another article debating the need for witches to venture into the workforce 'too soon,' preaching about family morals, values and ethics. The author was promoting the new book, *The Stupid Things Witches Do To Mess Up Their Lives* by Laurel Meissinger. And on the sports page, there was a picture of Harry and Ron attending a Quidditch game, spouting about Ron bravely facing the public while showing his support for the Chudley Canons.

She thought that perhaps this week she might venture out into Diagon Alley. She should show the wizarding world that she was not afraid of what they thought and that she had made the right decision.

Once at the lab, Hermione got so engrossed in her work, that before she knew it, it was time for lunch. When she arrived in the lunchroom, she saw that Gilles was at their usual table. "Good afternoon," she said cheerfully as she slid into the seat across from him.

"You had a good weekend?" he asked, noticing her good mood.

She considered his question for a moment. "It actually was. I spent most of the day with my parents yesterday, and it felt really good to talk with them about everything. I think it's just my nature to worry when things aren't perfect, even though there is very little in life that is."

"That is very true. And I have found much joy from those imperfections."

She considered his words for a few moments. "Perhaps I should learn to worry less and enjoy more?"

"I would recommend it. It has improved my relationship with my family."

"That and moving to another country," Hermione added humorously. "Though that's not something I think I need to do. I think everything will work out just fine." While she and Ron were still in the news, there was little of substance lately, as she'd discovered in today's paper. The first article had been the most sensational, as one would expect from Rita Skeeter. Subsequent articles had for the most part remained more factual, rehashing previous statements or digging up quotes from years ago. She had cringed when she'd read pieces where Harry and Viktor Krum had been dragged into the mix, but since most of the information used had been from her Fourth Year at Hogwarts, it hadn't held much weight, especially since Harry was happily married, and Viktor was playing Quidditch for the Berlin team the last she'd heard. Not to mention, that he had a new lady interest who attended every one of his games. Overall, other than a few by Rita Skeeter, any articles written had remained neutral, and the letters to the editor section had always published equal numbers of positive and negative letters. She was sure that was Reg's doing, and she ignored the negative letters and concentrated on the positive ones.

"I think it will, too," Gilles added. "I know you haven't really been out since the divorce was made public, but contrary to what you might think, it's no longer the major topic of discussion." He paused and watched her a few moments before asking, "I don't suppose you'd want to get together this evening? My cupboard is bare, and I prefer not to dine out alone."

"I'd love to, but I'm meeting an old friend." She wasn't exactly sure why she referred to Lucius as an old friend, but she thought that sounded less like a rejection. While she enjoyed spending time with Lucius, there was just something nice about getting out with a friend. She knew she should venture back into the wizarding world and that her decision to venture out to Diagon Alley was overdue. After all, she hadn't been able to check the new arrivals Flourish and Blotts for over a week, and she always enjoyed perusing the used book section. Maybe she'd even stop by Madam Malkin's for some new robes for work or possibly stop in to Lavender and Lace, Lavender Brown's new shop. "But I am free on Tuesday," she added, recalling that Lucius had a standing dinner engagement with Connor Greengrass.

He perked up at this pronouncement. "I know just the place. It's not too far from here if you don't mind the walk."

"I'll be sure to wear comfortable shoes."

The rest of their conversation during lunch passed pleasantly. She always found it so refreshing to get her mind off of potions for a little while in the middle of the day.

She felt a little bad about turning down Gilles' company after work, but she knew Lucius was planning on joining her. Moreover, he had been equally pleased that they would be meeting on Tuesday, anyway.

When she returned to the cottage, she decided to peruse one of the historical record books until Lucius arrived. It was a bit of a sneaky tactic, but she was dealing with Lucius Malfoy, and she assumed that he was used to this sort of thing.

Lucius arrived through the front door shortly before six and saw Hermione curled up in the chair in the library. "I'm surprised you aren't in your usual seat in the drawing room."

She looked up from her book. "I've been investigating the library this afternoon."

"Find anything interesting?" he asked casually as he tried to make out a title on the book she was reading before taking a seat in the opposite chair.

"Very interesting." She sat up and turned the book so the pages were facing him. "It was a bit of a shock to see that Henry VIII visited here twice." She watched him carefully to see how he reacted.

"He is probably the most famous visitor here," Lucius replied casually, as though it were nothing for a wizarding family to host the king of England, "though James II spent some time here with the younger son before he assumed the throne."

Katta popped in and delivered Lucius a glass of Scotch on a silver tray.

"But they're Muggles," she protested.

Lucius shrugged. "Times were different then. There was no International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy." He gestured at the book. "I'm sure that you have no doubt surmised that many of the visitors named in that book are Muggle nobility."

She smiled, having had her speculations confirmed. "I had and I verified it while visiting my parents."

"And I'm sure you found that information quite shocking: 'How could a pureblood family that has looked down on Muggles for generations possibly have consorted with Muggles?' is what I am sure went through your mind."

"Something like that," she replied. She was beginning to suspect that he was well aware those books were in the library and that she was sure to find them at some point during her stay.

He smiled at her. "As I said, times were different. Distinctions for whom to socialize with were made based on money and power and less on blood. Marriages were still based on blood, and wizards were sternly encouraged to marry witches, but wizarding and Muggle elite mingled freely socially. It had been that way for centuries. After all, King Arthur had Merlin as one of his advisors; Talesin served King Urien of Rheged and his son Owain mab Urien; Catherine de Médicis, wife of King Henry II of France, greatly favored Nostradamus, and Nicholas Flamel, as you know, advised the French kings and Flanders nobility in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Most kings did. It evened the playing field. Of course once Christianity began gaining favor, monarchs were more discreet about their relationships with wizards, just as wizards became more discreet about flaunting their magic."

"But if your family consorted with kings, the elite, and were granted a title shouldn't there be some sort of record." She had to believe that for Robert Malfoy to be named an earl he had to have been some sort of advisor to the king.

"When the Statute was enacted, members of the newly formed Ministry of Magic were tasked with removing all traces of magic from histories. They traveled from village to village erasing records of wizarding families and ensuring families were properly concealing their dwellings from Muggles. It was really quite simple to go through and alter records. For the most part there was only one copy. William and Mary even opened the royal archives for modification. Since record keeping was spotty at best, there was little effort put into standardizing the changes. I'm sure that has caused quite a conundrum to Muggle historians." He chuckled softly at this thought.

His explanation floored her. "But your family had a title!" She was having a hard time understanding his matter of fact response to her gaining this knowledge.

"Yes. Earl of... Westbrook, I believe," he replied as though this was something he gave little thought to.

"So your family has hidden the fact they used to consort with Muggles...were favored by Muggle kings and nobility." She tapped at the book. "It was a common occurrence and then suddenly the Statute comes about and Muggles are scum?"

Lucius took a sip of his Scotch and considered his words carefully. "Consorting with Muggles and marrying them were two different things to families in the upper echelons of magical society. Marrying a Muggle has been looked down upon for centuries, far longer than the Statute has been in place. I'm sure this will surprise you, but my ancestors were against the Statute." He raised his hand to stay her comment. "Not for any noble reason, but because they would lose access to the Muggle social elite. But when it was passed, far be it for a Malfoy to go against the newly created Ministry. It was the same with the other pureblood families: the Blacks, Rookwoods, Rossiers, Mulcibers, Greengrasses, Crouches, Longbottoms, Princes among others all abandoned Muggle friendships and hid themselves away. They formed the backbone of the wizarding social elite, which despite recent events still does exist, though the number of families has been diminished. Of course one could argue that decline has been years in the making. Look at the likes of Crabbe and Goyle."

"This was never covered in school," she said quietly, still trying to understand everything she was learning.

"And why should it? Does it really matter that my ancestors were the Earls of Westbrook or that they knew the monarchs of England? None of that is of any historical significance. Historical curiosity yes, but significance, no," he said instructively.

She looked at him, trying to read his expression. "You knew I'd find these books."

He shrugged. "I hadn't really thought about it. I knew none of the books here were dangerous. Most are either duplicates of books at the manor, second editions, moderately valued antiques, or ones of little historical significance. But the records of the cottage have always been kept here."

Before she could think of anything else to say, Katta popped back into the library. "Master, Mistress, dinner is being served."

Lucius rose to his feet and offered Hermione his hand. "Shall we?"

"Sure," she replied as she took hold of his hand. She wasn't sure what she had expected when she confronted Lucius with his family's past, but it definitely hadn't been a history lesson.

During dinner she tried to engage him in further conversation about his family's Muggle-loving past which transformed into the hatred she had been subjected to, but he kept changing the subject and reminding her that people continually adapt to the social norms of the time.

Of course this got her to wondering if that's what his friendship with her was: him adapting to the social norms of the present. After all, he had called her nothing more than a friend. She began to wonder if what she saw as flirtation was nothing more than his typical flattery. Based on their conversation over dinner, she began to think that she was definitely reading things into his behavior. He was merely trying to curry favor with her because she was an easier mark than Harry, and they were the two highest profile witches or wizards with a Muggle background.

Tuesday had been another enjoyable night out with Gilles. He had taken her to a small Muggle café. It was still relatively informal, but this felt more like a date than the last two times they had been out. He had been very courteous and attentive, but still very informal. He understood her in a way that few of her other friends did because he came from a Muggle family. She had been very careful to not overindulge and on her way back to the cottage had taken a detour through the gardens to enjoy the night-blooming jasmine, evening primrose and other night flowers. She was even treated to quite a few fairies venturing out amongst the blooms.

With the date of her Wizengamot hearing drawing nearer, speculation was running rampant in the news as there was nothing new to report. Rita Skeeter and Maggie Kerfuffle continually speculated on what Hermione was 'up to' since she had withdrawn from wizarding society, trying to divine what secrets she was brewing up at Malfoy Industries and whom she was socializing around with. Ron was in the paper frequently, reports on his comings and goings, especially when he was seen in public with Harry and Ginny or anyone outside his family. He'd been photographed with Gabriel Delacour and Fleur Weasley at a Quidditch match, looking rather besotted, but Hermione knew it was only because of their Veela heritage and nothing more.

Despite what was reported in the gossip section, Reg told her she was winning the war of public opinion. Of course, that mattered little to the Wizengamot, and Reg assured her there was no legal reason for the divorce to be denied.

Wednesday she decided it was time to venture out into Diagon Alley. A few people were gossiping, but then that was nothing new even since her school days and after the war, so she pretty much ignored them. What she did notice was that everyone left her alone, none of the mothers allowed their children to ask her to sign their books or magazines, and the shop clerks were polite even if they weren't as friendly as they once were. She had to admit that it felt good to be back out in public in the wizarding world even if it wasn't the warmest of welcomes.

When she browsed Flourish and Blotts, she saw a few people pointing discreetly and whispering, caught a few haughty or condescending glances, and overheard one woman say to her friend, "How could she give up an admirable wizard like that Mr. Weasley?" But at least no one tried to accost her with their opinions.

Among the periodicals, she found her eye drawn to *Witch Weekly*. Lucius' name was once again on the cover with a small inset photo of him and Elsa enjoying dinner. Opening the magazine, she saw that there were three more pictures of what appeared to be an intimate dinner at a very romantic restaurant. The article was written by Delphinia James, so it was less sensational than something written by Rita Skeeter, but it still painted the picture of a blossoming romance, and the pictures certainly seemed to support that assessment. *What other reason would there be for the two of them to be dining in a romantic Parisian restaurant?* she thought. Despite her better judgment, she read the article.

The ever luscious bachelor Lucius Malfoy was recently spotted at La Vigne d'Or, one of the most romantic and exclusive restaurants in Paris, with German beauty Elsa Schwartz. We've been watching this romance unfold for some time now and can't wait to see the couple formally announce themselves. It is painfully obvious to anyone who observes this couple that there is definitely a magical spark between them. They may try to claim it's merely a business relationship, but we know otherwise.

Hermione began to reassess what Lucius had told her. He had never actually said there was nothing between him and Elsa, and he had carefully worded his answer to whether there was someone special in his life. Of course she still wasn't entirely sure why she had asked him about his love life. It was possible that she was misreading his attentions as interest after having been so starved for attention for years. Besides, what would someone like him see in someone like her anyway? And with her just getting out of a relationship, she shouldn't be thinking about starting another one. She set the magazine back and made her way to the used book section.

She found a couple of books that looked interesting on wizarding history and found an old charms manuscript that she had been searching for and purchased those, stuffing them into her magically expanded handbag. As she looked at the beaded bag she realized that she really should purchase something more suitable to everyday use, not that she made it a habit of needing a magically expanded handbag, but for those times she did, it would be nice to have something more ordinary.

As she walked towards Amanuensis Quills, she saw Percy and Audrey walking the opposite direction. She smiled politely and nodded at them. They smiled uncomfortably and hurried on their way. Hermione sighed. She had never really been close to Percy and should have expected that sort of behavior, but it still stung a little. Hermione admired some of the quills in the window before admiring the robes in the window of Madam Malkin's. She liked this time of year when the school robes were out of the window and there was something more fashionable, something extravagant that Hermione could never see herself wearing, but she enjoyed looking and admiring the care the Madam Malkin put into her work.

She was happily enjoying a sundae at Fortescue's when someone sat in the chair across from her and said, "I'd heard you'd come out of hiding."

"Hello, Harry," she said happily. "Though, it's probably not a good idea for us to be talking to each other," she added as her initial happiness waned.

"I'm not here to spy for Ron. I wanted to see how you were doing. I haven't received any reply to my letters," he said, the concern clear in his voice. "Are you angry with me?"

"No," she sighed. "I'm not, and I know I've completely cut you out, and I'm sorry about that. My solicitor thought it best I not talk to any of Ron's family before the filing went through to the Wizengamot. I am sorry, but I did enjoy hearing from you."

Harry nodded as if he understood. "How are you holding up?" he asked, clearly concerned about her well-being.

"About as well as can be expected under the circumstances. How's Ginny?"

"She's holding up alright, though we all miss you."

She was a bit surprised to hear that given the initially chilly reaction she had got from Ginny. "I miss all of you, too. Maybe someday, when this is all over, we can get together. I'd really hate to lose your friendship over this. We've been through a lot together."

He smiled sadly. "That we have."

Hermione really wanted to ask how Molly and the others were handling this. She felt so bad about having to do what she did to Ron in the papers, but he had brought it upon himself even though she was sure the family wouldn't see it that way.

"So what have you been up to while you've been in hiding?" Harry asked.

"Some reading, some research, you know me," she replied lightly, trying to reassure Harry that everything was fine.

He chuffed a laugh. "Yeah, I do," he replied. "So, I'll see you later?"

She knew that until this was all behind her there wasn't much that they could talk about. "Yeah. I'll send you an owl."

"I look forward to it." He rose to his feet. "I'm really sorry it all came down to this," he said sadly before leaving.

She wasn't sure what 'this' he was referring to, but at least she knew that Harry did not hate her and did not blame her for everything that had happened. She could tell that he really wanted to talk about the whole thing, get her side, but that would have to wait until later. She finished her sundae and decided it was time to head home and look through some of rental listings Lucius had sent over. Staying at the cottage had always been a temporary measure, and it seemed like there would be no problem with her moving back to the wizarding world at large. And it's not like the cottage reflected her style at all. It was far too ostentatious, and she thought she was getting far too comfortable there. All she needed was a simple flat with space for bookshelves and she would be perfectly happy.

A/N: As always many thanks to beaweasley2 for her wonderful assistance, including suggesting *The Stupid Things Witches Do to Mess Up Their Lives* by Laurel Meissinger which is a thinly veiled play on the book, *Ten Stupid Things Women Do to Mess Up Their Lives* by Laura Schlessinger.

The Malfoy history and opposition to the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy is based off of information that was initially posted on the Pottermore site and cataloged on Harry Potter Wiki, though I have expanded on what was initially posted.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 of 29

Lucius' life grows more complicated as he pursues yet another business deal and tries to determine how to subtly let Hermione know about his interest in her.

Lucius had found it a bit of a surprise when Hermione had confronted him about his family's past. He had forgotten the record books were kept in the library. Of course, the contents of the cottage had been the furthest thing from his mind when he had offered it as a sanctuary to her.

He thought he had handled the situation quite admirably, especially since she had seemed to want to get into a debate about the hypocrisy of how the wizarding elite had gone from mingling with Muggles to despising them. There was so much that she did not understand about wizarding culture. As he'd tried to explain to her, marrying a Muggle had been looked down upon by the wizarding elite for as long as anyone could remember. It just wasn't done. There was too much risk of diluting magical abilities or birthing non-magical children.

As for being Muggle-born only a fool would not realize there had to be magical ancestors in the families somewhere. The problem was that you now had people entering magical society who were completely ignorant of the wizarding customs, traditions, assumptions and conventions and trying to dilute the magical culture with Muggle technology and devices which thankfully did not function in magical households. It wasn't just a clash of cultures, it involved simple things like not knowing magical etiquette, and if what he was seeing with Muggle society was any indication, it would soon be any form of etiquette. Not to mention Muggle-borns exposing how magic could be used to their Muggle family and friends, threatening a breach of the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy. Yes, it was possible for Muggle-borns to assimilate, but it was never simple, especially since Hogwarts didn't seem to feel that was important to teach the customs, expectations and fastidious rules of magical society like it used to centuries ago.

He sighed. If he had been as enlightened as a school governor as he was now, he could have suggested changes to be made to the curriculum to help the Muggle-born students assimilate into wizarding society. Perhaps it was time for him to petition the Ministry to be reappointed as a governor, though he knew that that task would require a great deal of apologizing and possibly groveling, two things that did not come naturally to him. What could possibly be in his favor, should he seriously entertain the idea, was the fact that in the last five years he had made it a point to hire and work closely with enterprising and gifted Muggle-borns. It was possible he could use this as leverage to convince the Ministry that he could provide advice on how to better prepare students for the world outside of Hogwarts. Especially since none of the current governors were major employers in the business sector.

The clock chimed six and he realized he was late for his dinner with Connor. He summoned his outer robe and checked himself in the mirror in the grand foyer before departing for his club. Connor was in their usual booth, enjoying a martini. Lucius took his seat and was almost immediately greeted by his usual Scotch.

"Something on your mind?" Connor asked before Lucius could apologize before being tardy.

"Many things," Lucius replied, not really sure where to start. It had been an eventful few days.

"Do you want to talk about it, or should I fill you in on the heck of a hunt you missed out on?" Connor asked.

Lucius mulled this question over for several seconds. "I've been thinking about asking to be reinstated as a Hogwarts governor."

Connor's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Really? After what happened..."

"I realize my conduct was quite... inappropriate, but I have also come to realize there are several gaping holes in the education our children have been receiving at Hogwarts holes that I probably should have done something about when I was first a governor."

"Such as?" Connor prompted.

"First and foremost is History of Magic. It is a disservice to everyone that Binns has been allowed to stay on as long as he has. Binns loves to prattle on about the Goblin Wars, but there is much more to our history than that, important events that he completely bypasses. It's time he was replaced. Additionally, and I realize how ironic this sounds, there should be a Wizard Studies class to help Muggle-borns integrate more smoothly into their new culture. It's all well and good having a Muggle Studies class, even though it's inept at best, but even you and I as youth had interaction in the Muggle world. We were taught by our parents how they dressed and how not to draw attention to ourselves, but no one teaches those things properly anymore. And for those who have never encountered the wizarding world until they receive their Hogwarts letters, they have no idea how we dress, how we behave, our way of life our customs, traditions and expectations or our laws. Over the years I have witnessed that social awkwardness time and again. Even one as well-bred as Justin Finch-Fleely has at times fumbled with wizarding etiquette."

"That is true, though I know a few young folk from fine wizarding families who could probably use that as a refresher," Connor added.

Thinking to what he knew of the Weasleys, Mulcibers, Goyles, Crabbes and a few others, Lucius found that he could not disagree with this. "Then perhaps it is something that should be mandatory the first year with a second year for those who need further instruction. But something needs to be done. I won't watch our way of life disappear because no one wants to speak up."

The menus arrived on the table and Lucius took a moment to peruse the day's offerings before ordering his dinner to the charger plate before him. In short order his entrée, fillet of beef with jacket potato, arrived. Looking across the table he saw that Connor had ordered grilled salmon with rice pilaf. Before resuming their conversation, they waited for the sommelier to bring them their wine.

"So what else is on your mind?" Connor asked once they had both savored a few bites of their meal.

Lucius had been trying to determine how best to discuss this with Connor. "The young witch to whom I'm attracted." He paused. "First off, I've not been following her or anything, but I have seen her behaving rather flirtatiously with another wizard. I don't believe there is anything untoward going on, she isn't that sort of person, but it unnerved me to see that, to wonder if perhaps you were right, that I was reading too much into this."

"As I don't have all the facts, it's difficult to offer advice, but have you thought of asking her?"

"Ask her what? If I ask her what her intentions toward this other wizard are, how does that make me look? It makes me look like I am stalking her. And I most definitely can't ask her how she feels about me, not yet, anyway." He tried to determine how much he dared confide in Connor. "I do spend time with her in a completely platonic context, but perhaps I am being too discrete. Perhaps I should give her some small taste of my affection for her. Nothing so forward as a kiss, mind you, but something to let her know that I would be open to furthering our relationship when the time is right."

Connor put down his utensils and leaned forward, speaking in a hoarse whisper even though it was highly unlikely anyone would overhear them at their club. "I have a pretty good idea who your mystery witch is. I presume she's the one who's been in the news this last week, Potter's friend."

Lucius had known that Connor would figure this out given the information he had revealed previously, especially with the divorce featured prominently in the news. "She is," he admitted softly.

"Merlin, Lucius!" Connor said harshly.

There was a long silence as neither wizard knew what to say next. "Speak your mind," Lucius finally said.

"Where do I begin?" Connor asked as he raked his fingers through his hair. "She's Draco's age. She could be your daughter."

"I most certainly am not her father," Lucius replied. "And it's not like wizards haven't married younger witches for as long as anyone can remember. My father was thirty years older than my mother. And let's not forget that Mellencamp married a witch less than half his age, and no one raised an eyebrow and he's sixty-five. She's surprisingly mature for her age, and we do enjoy spending time together, so I cannot see it will be an issue."

"Her," Connor looked around, making sure no one was paying attention to them, "parents are... Muggles."

"Yes, they are," Lucius replied simply. He knew this would be something that could be socially stigmatizing. It was one thing to accept Muggle-borns into wizarding society and hire them for important positions. It was quite another to marry one; the expectations of upper-class magical society frowned on imprudent marriages, even one to such extraordinary witches as Hermione.

"I know times are changing, but... Don't you think this is a bit extreme?" Connor asked probingly.

"I'm not doing this to curry favor with the Ministry, if that's what you're asking. I truly love her. Besides, look at this latest generation of elite and tell me that our gene pool couldn't use some expansion."

"You want to have children with her? The witch who is divorcing because her husband was trying to force her to have children?" Connor asked incredulously.

"That was only one of her reasons: she wanted to wait to start a family and he did not; and the expectations of his family toward producing offspring, the sexual inequality, rigid judgmental attitudes, and their not-to-subtle machinations were weighing on her, mentally and physically. They are divorcing because they are not compatible," Lucius explained. "The timing of when to begin a family is but a small part of that. And she has mentioned that she is not opposed to children, only that she is not ready to become a mother at this time. I can wait."

"Merlin, Lucius," Connor said again, clearly at a loss for words. "And you think there might be some other wizard vying for her affections?" he finally asked.

"It's possible. She is a lovely, intriguing witch, and quite desirable. I only caught a glimpse, but they were definitely flirting with each other." He thought it more than possible since she was choosing not to mention spending time with Gilles.

Connor set down his fork and took a sip of his wine. "Well, it's not like this other wizard can do anything at the moment either. And you've said you've placed yourself favorably as her friend and confidant."

"I have. But it still worries me," Lucius said as he sliced off a bit of his beef. "He is a coworker, near her age, and I have learned they lunch together."

"But you have dinners with her, presumably keeping her company in the evenings after the meal. What's your worry?"

Lucius waited until he swallowed before answering. "My worry is that she will see me as Draco's father, that our past will complicate matters. I was involved in a battle where my... associates tried to kill her." So far she had done nothing to highlight their age difference, but it was always there, the unspoken Erumpent in the room. It was why he generally did not talk about Draco or Scorpius, that would only serve to remind her how much older he was.

"But surely she has learned that you aren't that wizard anymore, and you've told me you think she might see you as a potential suitor," Connor stated and took a bite of his rice. "I'm not sure there's anything you can do other than be there for her."

"On that note, I'll have to cancel our dinner for next week. That's the day of her hearing and hopefully we'll enjoy a celebratory dinner."

Connor arched an eyebrow skeptically before taking a bite of his salmon.

"Merlin, Connor. I'm not going to try to bed her before the ink is dry," Lucius stated, setting down his wine glass. "There is still the matter of the waiting period, which I intend to honor, though I will be a bit more flirtatious near the end to woo her."

Connor shook his head. "This is really the witch you want?" he asked in disbelief.

Lucius finished the last of his wine. "It is. I haven't felt this way since I courted Narcissa. Every other witch I have met socially has bored me. But she... is special." He couldn't explain how she made him feel.

"I can't deny you have a new spring in your step since you've met her," Connor stated and ate a bite of his vegetable. "If you wait to woo her, this other fellow might move in before you do, you may have to let your intentions be known sooner than later. And you'll have to be cautious, especially in public. The timing and all. There is a chance this will be received with a large thud."

Lucius waved off Connor's concern as he swallowed a bite of his potato. "I have too much money and influence for this to be much of a scandal. Besides, she's one of Potter's best friends. Who would dare speak out against her, especially if the divorce proceeds as I believe it will? Yes, there will be whispering, but it won't last long. And what do I care if it does? You know how I feel about the social gossips."

"Indeed I do," Connor replied knowingly, eating one last bite of his dinner. "You know, this could be one of the more interesting things to happen since the end of the war."

"Most definitely," Lucius agreed as he watched as the plates cleared from the table and their after dinner cognacs appeared. "There really is nothing I can do about this other wizard, is there?"

"Since you can't tell her how you feel, you could always fire him," Connor offered half-jokingly.

Lucius tipped his head and glared at Connor. "I know you are joking, but that was not a very good one. I'm not one to waste talent, and he is a very gifted brewer. At least they don't work on the same team, and I can ensure that won't for any future projects either."

Connor laughed and tipped his glass in mock salute. "To future endeavors."

Lucius sipped his cognac to hide his smirk.

They spent the next thirty minutes recounting the highlights of the hunt. Lucius had to admit it sounded like everyone had a good time, but he knew that the time he spent with Hermione was time well spent.

When they were getting ready to leave, Connor asked, "I don't suppose you wanted to get together this weekend and see if we can track down the rest of that sounder?"

"I could come over Sunday morning. Contrary to what you might think, I don't spend all my free time with her." Lucius knew that he couldn't do that. He longed to be able to be seen with her in public where it would be easier to keep his urges under control.

"See you early Sunday morning then... unless you prefer later?"

"Early is fine. Better to track them down then. See you Sunday," he said before Connor Disappeared. He then left for his manor and to ponder what he could possibly do to discreetly let Hermione know he was interested in her, especially in light of their conversation on Saturday where he tried to convince her she was nothing more than a friend.

The first thing Lucius did Wednesday morning was review the reports on his desk. He then flipped open a folder and began reviewing the information pertaining to Belle Déesse, a French beauty product company. He had a meeting scheduled for ten o'clock with Jacques Dupré. He had reviewed the financial data and the comprehensive proposal his team had prepared, so he did not expect negotiations to be protracted. There would be the usual back and forth as Dupré tried to gain some concessions for his company, of which Lucius had several points he was willing to allow, general negotiations should end favorably for both parties. He always made the contract harsher than he was willing to accept so that he could look flexible and magnanimous when the terms were finalized.

He knew that this was the perfect time for this acquisition. Life in wizarding Britain had stabilized and more people had disposable income. Their main competition would be Madame Beatrice's Better Beauty. He knew that Belle Déesse products were superior, at least according to Narcissa and her friends, and could be profitably sold for a similar price. During the war, Dupré had lost his British supplier and had never tried to get back into the British market. While Dupré did sell his product in other countries, he faced more domestic competition there just as he did at home in France. The loss of the British market had weakened the company enough to make it vulnerable to takeover. Lucius' primary competition in this merger was Soulié Prachtige Cosmetica, a growing business in Charleroi that had expanded distribution in Germany and Netherlands within the last six years and had turned its attention toward France.

While it was true that Lucius could have struck a bargain for British distribution, that was not his style. When he did business with someone, he expected to be able to exert a certain level of control. He knew that Dupré was eager to reestablish his interests in Britain, and Lucius knew that gave him the upper hand in negotiations. He fully intended for this to be the only time they met in Rouen.

Lucius chuckled at the fact he had joked with Narcissa on more than one occasion that he should just buy stock in the company and here he was prepared to buy the whole company.

Shortly before ten, he went to his outer office and found Reg, one of his junior solicitors, and his personal assistant waiting for him. They all Apparated to the reception area of Belle Déesse where Dupré was waiting for them, an attractive young woman standing by his side. Introductions were made, and Lucius learned the young woman was Joséphine Dupré, Jacques' niece and company legal representative.

They then proceeded to a small conference room where pleasantries were exchanged and refreshments served before they got down to business. Dupré had seemed shocked that Lucius was proposing an acquisition and not just distribution rights. Lucius had been purposefully vague with his initial approach, although he'd implied that he knew the company faced a possible hostile takeover. He knew that someone like Dupré would be resistant to selling his company, regardless of the company's vulnerability, and would not have consented to the meeting if he had known Lucius' true intent. As a concession, Lucius was proposing a high degree of autonomy since the majority of the Belle Déesse market would remain in France.

It took slightly more than an hour, but Lucius finally had Dupré seriously considering the merger. Reg pulled the contract proposal out of his case and went through it before they left the proposal for Dupré's consideration.

When they returned to London, Lucius was reasonably certain that Dupré would agree. After all, the British market was too large to ignore and the terms of the acquisition were not unreasonable, especially since he was allowing Dupré a very high level of control, unlike his acquisition of the Kesselwerks.

On Friday Lucius was once again mired in administrative work, trying to get everything wrapped up before the weekend. He focused his attention on the acquisition of Belle Déesse. They had submitted a counter-proposal. He read through the document and made several annotations. While he knew that he would have to provide capital so they could expand to meet the demand from entering a new market, he thought the sum they were asking for was excessive. He revised it downward with a note to require justification for a higher sum. There were a few other proposed changes he questioned and made some comments, but overall he had expected many of their changes. He set the documents in his outbox where they would be delivered to Reg for further negotiations. With luck they could conclude this deal early next week.

He looked up when there was a knock at his door. His secretary looked in. "Sir, Mr. Humphries is here. It's time to go."

Lucius glanced on the clock on the mantle. "So it is. One moment."

"Yes, sir," she replied before closing the door.

He organized his desk and straightened his robes. This should be his final visit to the Schwartz Kesselwerks. Everything seemed to finally be coming together. Elsa had a competent management team who understood their advisory role. They also understood their responsibility to report to him.

In his outer office, he found Mr. Humphries sitting patiently, waiting for him. Humphries was his production expert and was a capable second set of eyes to evaluate business practices at the Kesselwerks.

When they arrived at the gates, they were met by Herr Strauss, one of the new managers. "Guten tag, Herr Malfoy. We are ready for your review."

Lucius liked how Strauss always got right down to business. He was very efficient. "Danke, Herr Strauss. I trust that everything is running as it should."

"It is. Everyone has settled into their new positions and the new manufacturing process has been fully refined."

"Excellent. Will Frau Schwartz be joining us?" Lucius asked, somewhat surprised that she hadn't met them given her interest in him.

"She is meeting with one of our suppliers and will be joining us when she is finished."

Lucius would take any reprieve he could get, though she was generally very professional in front of others.

About halfway through the factory review, Elsa joined them. She added a few things to what Strauss was telling them, but let him do most of the talking. When the factory review was completed they adjourned to her office where they discussed how the new management staff was working out, and Elsa proudly informed Lucius of the favorable terms she had made with their copper supplier.

"I cannot thank you enough for the assistance you have provided, Lucius," she said, smiling at him in a rather predatory way.

Her demeanor made Lucius uncomfortable, especially since Strauss and Hughes were in the office with them. "Well, it was beneficial to us both. I have cleared the final hurdles and there should be no problem importing your cauldrons into Britain. I have with me an order for fifty standard size 2 cauldrons from Potage's Cauldron Shop in Diagon Alley, and one from Bleasdale's Pewtersmith Works in Hogsmeade for sixty." He pulled the purchase orders out of the inside pocket of his robes and handed them to Elsa. "If Bleasdale is satisfied with the quality, he is amenable increasing this number to four hundred and to stocking our specialty cauldrons in his stores. If he does, Potage will follow suit. The marketing is in place to convince wizards this is a superior cauldron, and I have high hopes." Including the hope that this would be his last visit to Frankfurt for some time, since both major sellers of cauldrons in England were willing to do business this time. All that was left was for the marketing team to lock down the shops in Wales and Ireland.

"That is excellent news." She smiled at him again. "Gentlemen, could you give Lucius and me some privacy?"

He did not like the way she was looking at him and that she had asked to speak with him alone. Well, for the most part their business was concluded, so he would be free to tell her he was not interested.

"I supposed this will be the last of your visits?" she asked, not hiding the disappointment in her voice.

"Everything is in order here and my attention is required elsewhere," he replied professionally.

"Would you then consent to dinner tonight, as friends, not as business associates?" She grinned seductively at him.

"I'm afraid I can't. I already have plans for the evening." He had been prepared for this.

She leaned forward against the table, exposing her cleavage. "You could cancel them."

"I'm afraid not." He decided it was best to stop this now. "Elsa, you have made no secret of the fact that you are attracted to me, and I do find you to be a very beautiful and enchanting witch, but I do not see us as a couple."

"You can say that without giving it a chance?" she asked, clearly not willing to give up.

"Oh, but I have given us consideration, as you well know, and although I do find you attractive, I'm afraid that my feelings have not grown in that regard. Ours will be nothing more than a business relationship." He saw that she was about to protest and raised his hand. "It has nothing to do with the distance. I simply don't feel that way about you. I apologize if I have led you to believe otherwise." He had thought of telling her that he just wasn't ready to get involved with someone, but he knew it would only be a matter of weeks before word of his interest in Hermione was revealed to the public. He rose to his feet. "As our business is concluded, I bid you good day." He gave her a gentle handshake before departing and meeting Hughes in the outer office for their return trip to London.

Hopefully this was finally behind him.

By Saturday Lucius had decided to see how important his presence was to Hermione. Dinners during the week had been pleasant and they had engaged in two more chess matches, one of which she was able to win. She had seemingly let the matter of his family's behavior before the Statute drop and their conversations had returned to more magical subjects such as her latest academic acquisition on Charms. He longed to show her some of the books in his library. He knew that she could easily spend a lifetime poring through his collection.

He glanced to the window as though checking the weather while they were finishing up breakfast. "It's far too nice a day to remain inside. This would be a good day to winterize the garden." He knew the weather would be temperate and sunny, and that those days would be coming to an end as autumn set in.

"You garden?" she asked, not hiding the shock in her voice.

He knew she would find it shocking that he would do something so mundane. "I find it relaxing. It's a hobby I have undertaken since Narcissa's passing. She always loved the flowers, so I do it in memory of her." He thought fondly of the afternoons when he would watch her working in the garden from the window of his study and how happy that simple act had made her.

"I think that's lovely," Hermione said, but she felt that sentiment was not adequate to describe his action. "Sadly we never had a garden, so it's not something I got to do."

"Well, if you feel the need to get your hands dirty, my garden is at your disposal," he offered, curious as to whether or not she would accept his offer.

Clearly she was caught off guard by his suggestion. "Oh, I wouldn't want to intrude," she replied, obviously thinking that the gardening was his private moment in memory of Narcissa.

"It wouldn't be intrusive. I would enjoy the company, and I think you would find it therapeutic," he said in way that was hospitable, yet not pushy.

"I... don't know. Your house..." She shuddered at the thought of returning to the manor, and wrapped her arms around herself for comfort.

Realization dawned on him. The last time she had been at his house, she had been subjected to the whims of his deranged sister-in-law, not to mention he'd been desperate to regain the Dark Lord's favor to keep his family safe, and his own actions had been reprehensible. He had tried so hard to put the ugliness of his past behind him that this had completely slipped his mind. "Ah, yes, of course. Forgive me for not having considered that. That was horribly inconsiderate of me."

She smiled weakly. "It's not something I prefer to dwell on, but I don't know." She looked away from him and stared out the window at the late summer day.

"Well, I will keep it a standing offer so that if the day comes..." He paused, not entirely sure what he could say to make it more palatable. He feared that he had ruined the moment.

Hermione was clearly debating the pros and cons of his offer and finally, she said, "Though, this is work in the garden, so I wouldn't actually have to go in the manor, would I?"

"If that is your wish," he replied simply, hoping he didn't sound too eager. She was choosing to spend time with him, not trying to get him to leave so she could see Gilles.

"Let's see how it goes," she replied, managing a timid smile. "Give me a moment to change into something better suited to digging around in the garden." She flashed him one last smile before leaving the table.

He took this as a measure of how much she valued his companionship. And of course, this was a small step in the right direction for their relationship. After all, if they were going to have a formal relationship, she would have to spend time in the manor. As many horrible memories as there were in his manor, it was still his family home, and he did not feel right abandoning it.

He grinned. This was all looking very good for him. Now he just needed the opportunity to let it slip to her how special she was to him.

Hermione and Lucius had an enjoyable morning of preparing his garden for the winter. She had a passable knowledge of gardening from Herbology, though she had never really cared for the more mundane plants found in a typical garden.

Many of the plants were being dug up for compost, but a few varieties were to be placed in pots and would be brought indoors for the winter. The others would be trimmed back and freshly mulched for the winter. And then finally there was the planting of the bulbs. Lucius did not expect them to finish the work in a single day, but they could make a good start.

Hermione brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "I've finished digging up the petunias, now what."

"You can help me with the peonies," he offered.

She looked at what he had been doing by trimming down and dividing the peony bushes and looked as though she was not sure she wanted to tackle something that difficult right now. "Isn't there something else that needs digging up?"

"I'm afraid not. All the annuals have been taken care of. It's time to work on the perennials. Come, I'll show you how to divide one up." He gestured for her to join him. She knelt next to him, and he talked her through dividing a peony bush.

"I'm not sure I understand," she said as she stared at the bush before her.

He shifted behind her, took her hands in his and guided her through dividing that bush. As he did so, he could feel his heart racing, libido reacting to being so close to her, to feeling her pressed against his chest, taking in the subtle scent of her soap. He longed to wrap his arms around her, kiss her tenderly. Somehow he managed to guide her through dividing the plant. "That's all there is to it," he whispered softly into her ear, not trusting his voice to speak clearly at anything louder than that.

She slowly turned her head to look over her shoulder at him, and their eyes locked for several seconds. He started slowly moving closer to her as though he was going to kiss her. Just before their lips touched, he released her hands and slowly backed away.

"I... think I've got it," she replied, but her eyes did not leave his.

He smiled warmly at her and moved to a different part of the flower bed lest he lose complete control of himself. It was supposed to be a little taste, something that would appear as though he had let his emotions get away from him, but he just couldn't push the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

They worked in silence for the next half an hour, but he did catch her stealing the occasional glance at him. His heart had been beating so fast when he had shown her how to work with the peonies that he was sure she must have heard it.

She knelt next to him. "I've finished with the peonies," she said softly.

He looked up and saw that she had. "I think that perhaps we ought to break for lunch," he said, not entirely sure of giving another gardening lesson at the present.

"About what happened earlier..." she started.

He glanced at her quickly and looked away, an embarrassed smile on his face. "Forgive me for that. A foolish indulgence by someone who should know better."

She took hold of his hand. "I wouldn't have minded," she replied. "You make me feel like I'm the most important person in the world."

He did his best to keep his emotions in check now that he had confirmation of how she felt, that she did reciprocate his feelings. He finally looked up into her eyes. "To do so now... it could ruin everything." He pulled away from her and rose to his feet. "Hermione, while we may have feelings for each other, we cannot act on them." He found that he could not meet her gaze. "It would put everything at risk."

She sighed and sat back on her heels. "I know. I just... I wasn't sure that's how you felt."

"For now it doesn't matter. We must bury our feelings for each other at least until your divorce is final."

"And even then it's not a good idea to rush into anything, is it?" she asked as she rose to her feet.

He smiled at her as he realized she was finally starting to understand the complex and aggregate rules of behavior of the magical community. "It must not look as though this is a relationship that was developed prior to your divorce. For now my friendship with you has been kept very low key and private, and it would be wise to keep it as such. But we must be careful, especially since your husband has expressed a suspicion that there is another wizard. Any impropriety, perceived or based in fact, could seriously ruin your and my reputation, although mine has seen far worse. I'd hate for you to feel the consequences. We must maintain the position of merely companionable friendship and that there is nothing imprudent in your behavior...nor in mine toward you." He reached his hand up and brushed her cheek, looking softly into her eyes. "I think it would probably be best if you left for now, put some distance between us." He could tell that she was just as conflicted as he was.

"You're probably right like you always are." She laughed softly. "I do want to thank you."

"For what?" He was confused.

"For helping me realize that I don't belong with Ron. At the time I didn't know that I wanted, that I wanted to be with someone like you. But you made me realize that people like you existed, and that I didn't have to settle for someone like him." She smiled at him. "I'll see you later."

He watched her walk down the path that would take her to the front gate where she could Disapparate. He did not know whether to cheer or to curse. She had admitted her feelings for him, but now that it was out between them, what would happen? He knew that the more time they spent together, the more likely it was that something would happen between them to turn their friendship into something more, something that Weasley could use against her. Something the judgmental web of magical society could use against her.

He did not want to abandon her in her time of need, but he also knew how precarious their situation was. This was a time when he needed to proceed very carefully.

A/N: As always many thanks to the wonderful beaweasley2 for her input and helping me clean up the grammar and punctuation. And also many thanks to those who have taken the time to let me know what they think of this story. It has been a real joy to me to see others enjoying this tale.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 of 29

Hermione's life has suddenly become a lot more complicated. As they day of her hearing approaches, will it finally start to be simplified?

Hermione was still confused when she returned to the cottage. She had suspected that Lucius was interested in her, but to have it confirmed... It had surprised her, especially considering what she had been seeing in *Witch Weekly* lately. And she knew that he was right; they absolutely could not act on their feelings yet. Ron was already suspicious, although at the time his suspicions had been utterly groundless, and she knew that he was trying to figure out where she was hiding from the frenzy. Even Harry didn't know none of her friends knew, and she definitely had no intentions of telling them.

And then there was the matter of Gilles. She wasn't quite sure how she felt about him. For now they were just friends, but she wasn't sure if his flirtatious manner was just how he was or if it meant he was interested in something more.

For lunch she had gone out to a café that she'd enjoyed as a child and had ordered a simple sandwich, mostly to be in familiar surroundings so she could process what had happened that morning. But for dinner decided that she would rather cook dinner for herself than ask Katta to do it for her. Even though a part of her wanted the company of the house-elf, she enjoyed actually cooking a meal, something she had not done much for herself in the last few weeks.

She was not surprised when Lucius did not join her for dinner even though a part of her had hoped that he would, and she'd made plenty in anticipation of his visiting. She wondered when she would see him again and considered sending him a letter, but she had no idea what she would say to him, so she gave up on that idea.

Sunday was another beautiful day, and she decided to spend it exploring the property rather than stay in the cottage. After all, winter weather would be coming soon enough, not to mention she would be moving to flat in London at the end of the week and would not have access to a private garden. While her new abode could not compare to Lucius' cottage, the modest one bedroom was all that she required. Since it came partially furnished, it would require minimal effort on her part to make it her new home.

As she started climbing up one of the hills, she noticed Lucius silhouetted on the top of the hill in the late afternoon sun, his cloak swirling around him in the light wind. She could feel her heart beating faster, and it was not due to the exertion of climbing the hill. "Lucius!" she called out excitedly once she was nearly at the top.

He smiled at her fondly. "Hermione," he said softly.

She was not sure what she had expected, a hug perhaps, but while his greeting was friendly, it was not what she had hoped for.

Neither were his first words. "I never intended to complicate your life in this manner. I had intended on keeping my feelings for you hidden for the time being."

"You weren't doing that a good a job of it," she replied playfully.

He chuckled softly. "No, I suppose not. You make me feel a way that I have not felt in quite some time. I had of course hoped, but never imagined that you would feel the same way about me. After all, we have a rather tumultuous past among other things."

"The past is the past. Despite what those who I thought were my close friends may think about you, you have more than proven you have changed. As to the other things, none of that's very important to me. What's more important is the person, and I like the person you have become."

He took her hands in his. "You do not know what it means for me to hear that."

She fell against his chest and let him embrace her, wanting nothing more than to feel a comforting embrace.

He wrapped his arms around her and she could feel his chin gently resting against her head. "We must be very careful. Your husband already suspects there is another man in your life. There is no reason to make that a reality."

She sighed. "I know. Will I still see you?"

He released her. "I think perhaps it would be best to keep some distance between the two of us for the time being." He brushed a strand of her hair behind her ear. "The less temptation we present each other, the better. Besides you are moving at the end of the week, and it would hardly be proper for me to be seen visiting you in London."

She hung her head; she knew he was right. There would be no way for him to visit her at her new flat without drawing the wrong sort of attention. She was beginning to regret her decision to live in wizarding London, but she had already signed the agreement. She tipped her head up to look at him. "It's going to be a long six weeks, isn't it? Presuming they grant the divorce at the hearing, that is."

"I'm sure they will see to granting the divorce," he reassured gently. "It may not be as long a time as you imagine. Once the divorce decree is made official, the frenzy will

die down in a week or so. I'm sure that something else will happen to capture the attention of the wizarding world. The more you are seen out in the wizarding world, the better it will be for you. I'm sure you've noticed that to an extent."

"I have. It's been bad, but not as bad as I feared after the first article." She looked up into his eyes. "I wish I hadn't signed the agreement on the new flat," she said sadly as she kicked her foot at the dirt in frustration.

"It's for the best. We both know what the reaction would be should anyone find out you are living here."

"I know." They stood side by side on the hill, staring down at the meadow. "How long have you felt this way?" she asked, recalling his behavior at Merlin's Cove.

He stared out at the manicured below. "Since that first evening at the library when you quite literally ran into me; something about you captivated me. Given the hour, I suspected that you had to be unhappy in your marriage. Not to mention you looked like a wilted flower in need of attention."

His confession alarmed her. "So you set about tearing us apart?" she asked pointedly, though there was no anger in her voice, trying to rationalize the timing of his statement. *Had he planned all this? Would he?*

He shook his head. "You don't really believe that, do you? I merely helped you realize what you already knew. As you will recall, I never said anything to undermine your marriage, not even during that week at the resort."

She quickly recalled everything she could about their conversations and actions; he was right, he hadn't. Not directly. "And speaking of that, did you know I was going to be there?" she asked, hoping she sounded playful.

His answering grin was playful. "You expect me to tell you all my secrets?"

"Yes, well, that one at least," she said and watched him. He smiled and turned to look out at the garden again. She realized he was not going to answer it, but his non-answer was not one that made her think it was anything other than chance. "Will you ever answer that question?"

"Perhaps one day," he replied evasively.

"You always get what you want, don't you?"

He gave her a mischievous look. "I think you know that isn't true, but I will relentlessly pursue that which I want. Now, it's getting late, so why don't we go inside and enjoy Sunday dinner?"

The day of the hearing arrived and she was pacing nervously as she mentally prepared to present her case. If it had been an uncontested hearing, she would not have had to attend, but as Ron had chosen to contest, they would both have to be there. At least Reg had been able to arrange for a closed hearing.

"Ah, good, I'm not too late," said Lucius after he Apparated to the cottage.

It still made her jump that he Apparated silently, but not as much as it had initially. She had taken the day off from work since she would not have been able to concentrate anyway. "Almost. I was just getting ready to leave." This would be the first time she would be back at the Ministry since she left her job there and it felt a little odd.

He crossed to her and placed his hand on her cheek. "Everything will be fine," he said reassuringly. "I'll come by after the hearing," he said.

She understood, knowing that he could not be there for her. "Thanks."

Since she was so nervous, she took the Floo to Reg's office, not trusting herself to Apparate. From there they would travel to the Ministry and her whole life would change. Reg had assured her that the hearing should be perfunctory since the Wizengamot had the depositions from each side. She and Ron were there to answer any questions the members might have. But that didn't make her any less nervous.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Weasley," Reg said reassuringly. "This should take an hour at most, but I don't anticipate it will take that long. We've outlined your reasons in a way that keeps with wizarding sensibilities. I can't see a single reason they would have for denying your petition."

"Thanks, Mr. Forsythe," she replied nervously.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ron and his solicitor, but she just looked straight ahead, not wanting to meet his eyes. He had had a chance to end this amicably, but instead he had chosen to have a tantrum and turn things ugly. Had he just signed the paperwork without contest, they probably could have divorced with a minimum of fuss. Instead he had thrown both their lives into turmoil.

Finally the door opened and they were called into the hearing room. While Ron hurried to be the first into the room, she decided to look more dignified and composed.

When Hermione walked out of the hearing room, she didn't feel the relief she had expected. Instead she felt a profound sadness. This time it was Ron's turn not to look at her, though he was doing so out of anger. His ears were bright red, betraying his emotional state.

A part of her wanted to say something to him, but she had no idea what she would say, so she said nothing.

Once she and Reg were away from the hearing room, he said, "Well, that was the hard part. As you know there is a six week waiting period for the divorce to be final. As long as you don't change your mind, my office will file the appropriate paperwork at that time, and you should receive an owl within two days with the documents making it official."

"Right," she replied numbly.

"During that time, I would recommend that you don't do any dating. It's not illegal; it's just one of those things that would not be received well by the wizarding world. We've won the public relations battle to this point, and it would be a shame for you to do something now that would turn the tide."

She thought about Giles, the dinners they shared that could be misconstrued as a date, she supposed, and then thought about what Lucius had said. "Okay."

He smiled sympathetically, watching her. "I know that you did not want to hurt him, that you did not want to drag his name through the mud like that, but remember, he was the one who started down that path. You didn't do anything wrong by defending yourself."

"I know, and I know that we had to go on the offensive, but it still hurts. We were friends for a very long time. And it hurts to lose that friendship," she admitted.

"I understand. Oh, now that the proceedings are over, there is no reason you can't talk to any mutual friends you have. I was sorry to have done that to you, but I didn't want to risk you accidentally letting anything slip."

"I understand why you did it. Thank you for your help, Mr. Forsythe. I wish I had never had reason to have met you, but your assistance has been invaluable. I couldn't have done this without you."

He bowed slightly. "It was my pleasure. Good day, Miss Granger."

It was odd to hear herself referred to as Granger after all these years, but she had got the Wizengamot to agree to the name change. She just felt it was necessary for the clean break and to start over. Oddly, that seemed to hurt Ron even more than the actual proclamation of divorce.

Realizing that she was alone, she decided to return to the cottage her home for the rest of the week.

Once there she saw that Katta had left out an assortment of snacks. Hermione nibbled at the food as she waited for Lucius. As she reached for a chunk of cheese, she saw the glint of gold on her left hand and lifted her hand up and stared at the ring. When she had first begun wearing her wedding ring, it had felt odd, but over the last five years, it had become a part of her. Slowly she removed it and examined the gold band, seeing the inscription on the inside, 'Love always, Ron'. It hurt because she did love him, just not the way you were supposed to love your spouse, but that chapter was closed. Now it felt odd to no longer wear it and there was a definite indentation in her finger that she tried to rub away, but it would be some time before her finger returned to normal. For now she tucked the ring in her pocket. She would decide what to do with it later. Maybe transfigure it into a pendant.

A half hour had passed and still Lucius had not come. She tried to think of why he might be running late since he had indicated he would return as soon as the hearing was over, but gave up because there were far too many scenarios to consider.

Finally she heard him calling her name from the foyer.

"In the drawing room," she replied.

He came in and sat beside her. "Forgive me, my dear. I had an urgent and unplanned meeting that I just could not leave. Reg sent me a message that said the divorce was granted."

She nodded. "It has been."

Picking up on her somber mood, he said, "I presume that it was as ugly as you had anticipated." He placed his hand on her leg for comfort.

She collapsed against his shoulder. "It was horrible. I knew they were going to read the depositions and that they might ask questions, but some of them..." She buried her face in his shoulder, trying to block the memory, but it would not go away.

Gently he used his fingers to guide her face until she was looking into his eyes. "Tell me about it. It will make you feel better to let it all out."

She did not want to look into his eyes while she was talking, so she leaned her head against his shoulder, drawing strength from his presence. "Well, it started with the reading of the depositions." She didn't go into the details because he was familiar with them.

"Then they started the questions, and that's when it got ugly."

Hermione stood stoically before the Wizengamot. Having heard the petition for divorce read aloud hurt more than she had expected. She reminded herself that Ron had a role in the failure of their marriage, that it was not her fault alone.

"Mrs. Weasley," an older wizard, Mr. Whitmore, said at the start of the question period, "Am I understanding this correctly: you do not want children?"

"No, sir. I do not want children in the immediate future, and Mr. Weasley and his family..."

He cut her off. "And why don't you want children right now?"

"I'm very good at my work, and I feel that I have a lot to contribute to the wizarding world as a researcher."

"And that can't wait until any children you have are school age?" he asked pointedly.

"The research I am doing is searching for treatments for various ailments. I think the family members of those who will be saved would find my work more important. I will be just as good a mother five years from now as I would be today, perhaps even better because I will have more maturity."

A middle-aged witch, whose nameplate read 'Madam Davenport', took the opportunity to take control of the questions and turned her attention to Ron. "Mr. Weasley, you have no doubt heard your wife's arguments many times, why are you unable to take her at her word."

"Well, ma'am, she just keeps saying later and won't give a definite time..."

Davenport held up the deposition. "It says here that she said she would be willing to start a family within the next five years, is that not definitive enough?"

"No, it's not. I know her and how she gets wrapped up in her work. She doesn't like to leave something unfinished, and I honestly think she would keep pushing it off a few more months or one more year so that she could complete a project. If she's unwilling to commit now, I don't necessarily believe she'll commit in five years."

It hurt Hermione to hear him say that, but a part of her knew he was telling the truth.

Davenport looked at Hermione. "Is he correct?"

Hermione nervously answered the question. "He is correct about my work ethic. But I think most people do not like leaving work unfinished. As to the seriousness of my five year statement, I have never given Mr. Weasley reason to believe that I would go back on my word."

A wizened old witch, Madam LeBeaux, bore into her with beetle black eyes that were obscenely magnified by her thick glasses. "Did you discuss family before marriage?"

"Well, er, no," she was forced to admit.

"And you didn't think that was important?" LeBeaux asked pointedly.

"It didn't occur to either of us at the time. We were still caught up in the aftermath of the War, and the expectations of everyone around us that we should get married." The way the witch questioned her made her feel like a small child caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

The elderly witch snapped her attention to Ron. "And you, Mr. Weasley, you didn't think this was important, either?"

"I dunno, like she said, we didn't think about it. I guess I thought she would want a big family since she seemed to like mine so much," he replied sheepishly, ruffling his hand through his hair.

"And you knew how ambitious your wife was before marrying her, am I correct?"

"Yeah, but I thought she'd be willing to wait until after kids to pursue anything." Ron was sounding less confident in his answers.

"And you knew that she was Muggle-born and thus unaware of what is considered normal wizarding life, did you not?"

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. It sounded like LeBeaux was on her side.

"I knew she was Muggle-born, and I guess I just didn't consider that she wouldn't realize it's not normal for a witch to have a career."

"Do you think it's wrong for her to want a career?" LeBeaux asked as she leaned forward over the raised dais where the panel was sitting.

Ron seemed to realize this was a tricky question to answer. "It's not that, it's just that I thought she would do it the traditional way. Stay home with the kids, get them ready for school and then she could start her career."

"So anything out of the ordinary bothers you?"

Ron smiled weakly, not knowing how to answer that question.

Whitmore took advantage of the pause to resume asking questions, addressing Hermione. "In addition to the family planning, you mention a lack of commonality. You knew Mr. Weasley since you entered Hogwarts, surely you would know how much you had in common seven years later."

It wasn't really a question, but he looked at her expectantly. "Despite our differences, we got along well in school for the most part and everything was happy after the war. The difference really manifested in the last two years when conversations would continually circle back to the subject of having a family. The stress became so much that it was affecting my life and made it impossible for me to continue living with Mr. Weasley. I repeatedly tried to get him to discuss other subjects, and that's when it became apparent that we don't have as much in common as we once thought."

Whitmore looked at her sadly and then looked to Ron. "Do you agree that you and Mrs. Weasley do not have that much in common?"

"We have loads in common," Ron protested.

"Such as? Do you share any common hobbies?" Whitmore asked.

"It all went downhill for him from that point," Hermione explained. "Ron's always had a special skill of making an idiot of himself, and that's what he proceeded to do for the next fifteen minutes or so until it culminated in Madame Davenport asking him why they should deny the divorce petition. Needless to say he couldn't come up with a good reason and that's when it ended."

For a long while Lucius said nothing, but rubbed her arm reassuringly. "Well, it's over now," he finally said. "I wish you had not had to go through that, but I presume that you don't have any regrets."

"No. I'm glad it's over. It feels as though a weight has been lifted off my shoulders, but I just wonder what the paper is going to make of it. I saw Rita Skeeter skulking around the Ministry."

He gave her a reassuring squeeze. "I wouldn't concern yourself with that. Now, I really do hate to have to leave you, but I unfortunately have business that I absolutely must see to. I'll return for dinner, though I may be quite late, so I would forgive you for starting without me." He gently pulled away from her.

"I think I can wait." She felt an emptiness as he pulled away from her. His touch had been so reassuring, something she could draw strength from. Even though the hearing was over, she still felt drained.

"I'll try not to be too late, but I can make no promises. It's a very busy time for me right now," he said apologetically.

"I understand," she replied and watched him leave. Just a few short weeks and she would not have to hide her feelings anymore. And she was relieved that Ron had no idea she and Lucius had been spending time together. Even though it was just as friends, the last thing she would have wanted was for Ron to bring Lucius up at the hearing. That would have made their blossoming relationship look even more suspicious to everyone, and she knew that Lucius would have been labeled a home-wrecker.

A/N: First off, many thanks to my beta beaweasley2 for all of her assistance. I can't thank her enough for all the input she has given me throughout the course of this story.

Second, I'd like to apologize to everyone for the delay in getting this chapter up. We've had end of summer vacation and back to school going on here and the oldest has suddenly found a pretty rebellious streak. Hopefully now that she's getting settled in school and I'm looking at putting the youngest in preschool that will give me some time when I'm not exhausted to put the finishing touches on the rest of the story. Other than the next chapter, most of it is written in draft form, so it's making some minor changes and filling in some holes. As long as time can be found on my end and beaweasley's end, I would like to post chapters about once a week. Don't despair, this story has not been forgotten and won't be put deep on the back burner again. Thank you all for your patience and encouraging reviews.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 of 29

With Hermione's divorce proceedings over, Lucius confronts this latest change in his life.

Wednesday morning, Lucius was enjoying breakfast and reading the *Daily Prophet*. He was quite pleased to see that while the article covering Hermione's divorce was on the first page, it was squeezed into a small column at the bottom. There really wasn't much to report as it had been a closed hearing and apparently Weasley had not felt like sharing details with the press. Of course, it probably hadn't hurt that Lucius had run into Josephus Addams, the *Prophet's* editor, at his club a few days back and had lamented how it pained him to see one of his employees, because they always seemed to mention where she worked, featured so prominently in the news when there were clearly more important items that should be the headline news.

The headline of the day regarded new legislation covering the import of goods by British owned companies, legislation he had quietly been lobbying for since he had begun his international expansion. Above the fold was also the announcement about his acquisition of Belle Déesse and how ladies could rejoice that they would once again be able to purchase their favorite beauty products without traveling to France.

The only other article above the fold reported on a drunken brawl in a Muggle village that had required the intervention of Obliviators, who had thankfully arrived before the Muggle news. There was a strong reminder that more and more Muggles had recording devices which could be used to record evidence of the presence of the wizarding

world.

He was quite pleased by the professional tone of the article covering the divorce and that there was nothing written by Rita Skeeter. He was sure that would turn up in *Witch Weekly* or *The Looking Glass*, but those were not serious news publications, and he paid little attention to what they published. Tomorrow's paper would surely have letters to the editor, but Josephus Addams did a good job ensuring that both sides were equally represented, so there would be little fall out for Hermione.

Setting the paper down, he pondered what was next. The end of this week Hermione would move out of the cottage, which would mean that he would see her less, much less. She would be living in Camden in North London, in a Jinney Alley flat, the magical community that one enters through the original cottage of Mother Red Cap and her famous black cat familiar next to The World's End pub, which would most definitely rule out him visiting her. He would just have to bide his time for a few weeks and settle for sending her letters along with casually running into her at work.

For now, he had business to attend to which would take his mind off his personal life. While the contract had been signed for the acquisition of Belle Déesse, there were quite a few details that had to be taken care of before they could begin selling the products in stores. Mr. Dupré had insisted that his niece, Joséphine, oversee the return to British stores. Lucius would be meeting with her tomorrow to begin making arrangements. He knew there would be no shortage of stores wanting to carry Belle Déesse products, but he intended to be quite selective to ensure the brand was not diluted.

As the day progressed, Lucius lost complete track of time due to the steady stream of parchment crossing his desk. There were times when he thought he should delegate more, but he also knew the company's success was in large part due to the fact that he kept abreast of all major decisions.

The door to his office opened and Connor entered before he could be announced. "Working late?" Connor asked as he made a beeline for the sideboard bar.

Lucius looked at the clock on the mantle. "It's only 5:30, I would hardly call that late." He rose from his desk and accepted the drink Connor handed him before both men sat on opposite sides of the leather sofa.

"I just thought you would have left for the day already. You know..." Connor hinted.

Lucius arched his eyebrow. "I already informed you that I intend to be respectful of the waiting period. As you have already pointed out, there will be a certain amount of scandal involved with my choice to court her, why do something to invite more?"

"You're really going to be proper about this?" Connor asked skeptically before taking a sip of his drink.

"As much as it pains me to admit, yes. I presume you can hold off any further match-making attempts from Felicia?"

"I'll do my best. She was actually considering inviting Elsa to dinner."

Lucius choked on his drink at this pronouncement.

"Don't worry. I got her to hold off. I told her you weren't ready to go public yet. Though I don't know how long she will wait. You know how she is with regards to you it's her personal mission to see you matched up with the perfect witch."

"Something I feel Narcissa might have had a hand in." Lucius knew that Narcissa had never wanted him to spend his life alone. She had told him as much as her condition worsened. "I think it probably best for me to inform Felicia that it wasn't working out between Elsa and me. That will let her down gently and should buy me a few weeks of peace as she lets me 'get over' my failed relationship."

Connor considered this plan a few seconds. "That should do it. You want me to break the news to her?"

Lucius considered this idea. He knew that Felicia was likely to overreact about the end of this fictitious relationship. "That might be for the best. I don't need her fussing over me."

Connor asked cautiously, "And you're sure that Granger is the witch for you? Given what she's been through, who her family is, it'll invite controversy."

"I'm beyond caring about that. Look at what I did in the past that was far worse than courting a divorcée. Besides, you've read the news. Reputation wise, I would say he was the one who came off on the losing end of that," Lucius replied confidently. Even if she had come out on the worse end of the deal, it would not have changed his mind.

"So I noticed. And I suppose you had nothing to do with that?" he asked slyly.

"All I did was recommend a solicitor to her. I have had nothing to do with the case. Of course I would recommend the best to her," he replied evasively.

"Of course," Connor replied.

Lucius could tell that Connor wanted to say more. "Well? You suspect that I drove them apart, don't you?"

"Lucius, I know you, and I believe what you have told me, but... perceptions..." Connor paused, as though unsure of how to continue.

Lucius asked pointedly, "And how would those perceptions get started? She and I, and now you, are the only ones who know of the advice I provided her." Even Connor would never know that she had stayed at his country cottage during the divorce proceedings. "As I have told you, I did nothing to convince her to end her doomed marriage. If there was any sort of proof that I had influenced her in any way, it surely would have come out in the hearing."

"You know I will take this secret to my grave. On my honor, I will not whisper a word of it to Felicia. Perhaps it's for the best she thought you were interested in Elsa."

"Indeed," Lucius replied with a raise of his glass.

"Well, once this is all public, I can assure you that Felicia will want to have the two of you over for dinner, though I daresay she will be somewhat disappointed it's not Elsa." Connor still did not look as though he entirely approved of what Lucius was doing.

"We will be more than happy to attend." He finished his Scotch. "So, this was your reason for visiting? To hound me about my choice?"

"I'm still trying to get over the shock that this is your mystery witch. I hope that she makes you happy and that you aren't reading too much into any of this."

"In a few weeks, we'll know for sure." He wasn't ready to admit to Connor that he had already revealed his feelings to Hermione, and she had admitted she reciprocated those same sentiments. While he valued Connor's opinions, there were certain aspects of their relationship he knew were best not to tell his friend.

Lucius decided to return to the manor before departing for dinner with Hermione. He wandered aimlessly as he considered his recent conversations with Connor. He had of course considered all the social ramifications of choosing to pursue a relationship with Hermione. There would be the first wave of outrage from his social circle over her blood status and the fact that she was divorced. Eventually, because of who he was, that outrage would subside. After all, wizarding Britain needed his money, and his business interests were diverse enough that it would be difficult for any moderate sized company or larger to thrive without conducting business with a Malfoy company.

From outside the old pureblood families, there would be those who would think it was an act to continue to restore his reputation, though in all honesty that was no longer needed. He had already paid for his allegiance with the Dark Lord and unlike last time, his actions proved he was a changed wizard. He was constantly on the prowl for the most highly talented witches and wizards in Britain. If he still harbored any ill-will to Muggle-borns, he would not have hired any let alone placed several in senior

leadership positions. He no longer had to prove to anyone that he consider all magical folk to be equal unlike some of his peers, who only paid lip service to that idea.

He stood at the window and stared out at the garden, contemplating his future for the first time since Narcissa's passing. Over the last three years, he had merely been existing going about his life, doing the same routines he had done over the previous twenty years, but it hadn't really been living.

Now he once again felt a zeal for life and all it had to offer.

He knew that it was premature to begin planning anything, but given the connection he felt to Hermione, he could not help himself. They were destined to be together he just knew it to be true. He chuckled at that thought. He had never been one to believe in Divination or any of the other fortune telling mumbo-jumbo, but just this once he would believe in destiny.

And once he could take his relationship with Hermione public, he hoped that it would finally cause Elsa to realize she had no chance, that his refusal had been final. He had no idea what was being reported in the German press, but the British press was clearly rooting for him to go public with a relationship with Elsa. And now thanks to his work acquiring Belle Déesse, they were trying to associate him with Joséphine Dupré, make him out to be some sort of libertine. Which would surely increase in frequency as he worked with Joséphine on the product launch since he would be seen with her out in public.

While he would have much rather been able to spend his evenings with Hermione, he knew that he had other obligations. Not to mention she was moving at the end of the week. Besides, the less time he spent around her, the less likely he was to do something that could ruin their relationship, or worse that would reveal his feelings to the public. If anyone were to suspect that he played any hand in her divorce, he was not sure that even his wealth could help his reputation at that point.

He walked down to his study and opened the safe. Reaching in the back, he pulled out a small, dusty box. After blowing off the dust, he opened it to reveal a stunning diamond and sapphire ring. It had been his mother's, and he intended to some day present it to Hermione. He knew his mother would approve. She had been so happy when Lucius and Narcissa had wed since her marriage had been loveless.

Gently he closed the box and placed it back in the safe. Soon enough the time would be right.

When Lucius arrived at the cottage for dinner with Hermione, he took hold of her hand in both of his. "You look much more relaxed this evening." He could tell that the nature of their relationship had changed. She was definitely disappointed in his platonic greeting, but he knew that was how it had to be. It would be far too easy for the two of them to let their emotions take control, especially in such a private setting.

They walked to the drawing room and sat on the sofa while they waited for Kappa to inform them dinner was served.

"I am. A great weight has been lifted. It's finally over and it didn't end in as big a fuss as I had anticipated."

"While the divorce hearing is over, this will not be the end of it. There will be controversy surrounding you for some time, especially when you resume social activities," he said gently. He knew that a scandal such as this would not disappear overnight.

"And that doesn't bother you?" she asked cautiously.

"My dear, look at what I have survived in the past. I'm sure that many people, you included, would not have expected me to become a model citizen. I find I no longer care as much what others think about me as I once did."

"I never really cared that much, but I do wish that I wouldn't be the center of attention anymore. I don't like the whispers, but I guess I should be happy that they are just whispers."

He longed to pull her into his arms and reassure her that he would protect her as much as he was able. "In time it will subside, though as I'm sure you can imagine when our relationship goes public, it will be quite the sensation."

She chuckled morbidly. "I have no doubt. What a couple we will make: the reformed Death Eater and the heroine of the war."

He tried not to flinch at her use of Death Eater. Yes, it was who he had been, but he had long ago left that behind him. "I was thinking more in terms of an eligible pure-blood bachelor from one of the oldest families in Britain choosing a Muggle-born."

Hermione blushed. "There's that, too." After a few moments she asked, "Will it really be that sensational?"

"Andromeda Tonks was completely disowned from her family when she chose to marry Ted and was snubbed by everyone of means, even those who had been her dearest friends."

"And you don't worry about that?"

He gave her reassuring smile. "I am the head of my family so there is no one to disown me. While others may express disapproval in private and small gatherings, no one will dare say anything to either of us. I have far too much influence for that to happen."

"I suppose that you do," she replied, her voice trailing off.

He could tell that something was bothering her. "Hermione?" he prodded.

"I'm sorry, it's just... When it's just the two of us, I tend to forget who you are. And when I remember it can be a bit intimidating. And now I started thinking about how others are going to see us," she rambled.

He slid closer to her and picked up her hand in his. "And this bothers you?" he asked gently.

"Well, I do wonder how my friends will see us. Harry wasn't happy that I would be working for your company. This... well, he's one of the few friends I know I'll still have after the divorce." She looked down at her lap.

Lucius had not contemplated how her friendships might affect their relationship. "I imagine our relationship will be met with some skepticism, but hopefully in time they will come to see what you have, that I am not the same wizard I once was."

She looked up and smiled at him. "I'm sure I can help them see that."

Looking into her eyes, he knew that she would work tirelessly to convince her friends that he was worthy of her attention. "I'm sure that you will."

Kappa informed them that dinner was ready and over their dinner of roast chicken and vegetables, she asked him about his acquisition of Belle Déesse. He was more than happy to tell her about the company and his plans for bringing the products to market. She listened intently, though he had a suspicion that she was not fully paying attention to what he was saying.

When dinner was over, he knew that it was best to say good night. "As lovely an evening as it has been, I think it best if I go."

"Do you have to?" she asked morosely.

He placed his hand on her cheek, which was flushed from the wine they had shared over dinner. "I'm afraid so." He longed to lean towards her and place a gentle kiss on

her lips, but he knew that had to wait. "I'll write you."

Hermione forced a smile. "I look forward to it."

The following afternoon, Lucius met Joséphine Dupré at his office. When she entered his office, he said, "Bonjour, Mademoiselle Dupré."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Malfoy," she replied in lightly accented English. "Since we will be conducting business in your country, it would be proper to use English."

"Of course," he replied with a slight incline of his head. "I thought you might like to see what is being reported about the acquisition." He turned to his desk and picked up the last several days' worth of the *Daily Prophet*. "The latest issues of the ladies' magazines won't be out until next Wednesday. We unfortunately missed the deadline, though this may work out for the best since I hope that by next week we will be able to report which shops will be carrying Belle Déesse."

"That may be for the best. If you don't mind, I would prefer to see the shops under consideration before viewing the proposed advertising."

"Of course." He knew that she would want to see what sort of shops would be carrying the product before viewing the advertising to make sure the aesthetic worked. He had not yet seen any of the proposals, wanting to give the advertising team as much time as possible to work on several different options. Of course, it was not as though Belle Déesse needed sophisticated advertising as it already had name recognition and a reputation. Though there was a change in demographics following the war with an emerging group of entrepreneurs from Muggle-born families who were likely unfamiliar with Belle Déesse. "If you will permit me, I can Apparate us both, of if you prefer, we can travel by Floo."

She looped her arm in his. "I have never enjoyed travel by Floo."

He Apparated them both to the wizarding enclave in Edinburgh. "While Marmoor Alley in Edinburgh is not as trafficked as Diagon Alley, it is growing in prominence with more upscale shops opening here. I have narrowed the choices here to Indulgence and True Beauty. While they are both new since the war, Belle Déesse would fit perfectly with their product lines." He led her towards True Beauty since it was closer.

He held the door open for Joséphine and walked slightly behind her as she perused the products on the shelves and took in the decor.

After a few moments, they were greeted by the clerk. "May I help you?"

Lucius looked to Joséphine, deferring to her.

"No, thank you. I'm just browsing."

"If there is anything I can help you with, please don't hesitate to ask."

Lucius watched as she browsed. He knew this store, like the others he was considering, sold mostly British products with a few imports. It was still somewhat difficult to import products, the Ministry having wanted to bolster the rebuilding of British industry and prevent shops from being flooded with cheaper imports.

After about ten minutes they left the shop.

He placed his hand on her back to guide her down the street. "Indulgence is this way."

When they entered the shop, he was met with a boisterous, "Lucius, how wonderful to see you again." A middle aged witch approached and kissed him on both cheeks.

"Drusilla, wonderful to see you again." He gestured to his right. "This is Joséphine Dupré."

"Miss Dupré, a pleasure to meet you. I'm Drusilla Dempsey, proprietor. If there is anything at all I can help you with, please let me know. I'm quite knowledgeable on all the products I carry and I'm willing to recommend a few personal favorites if you'd like." She flashed a knowing grin to Lucius and gave him a little wink.

Lucius tried to smile pleasantly. He could definitely feel a headache developing. Drusilla was one of the biggest gossips in the old wizarding families. He was sure it would be no time at all before everyone assumed he was dating Joséphine.

"I'll be sure to ask if I have questions. For now I'd just like to look around."

As Joséphine was browsing, Lucius could hear Drusilla thinking aloud. "Dupré? That reminds me of Belle Déesse. Do you remember that, Lucius?"

"How could I not? Narcissa was a loyal customer."

"What I wouldn't give to carry that," Drusilla said wistfully.

Lucius was sure that her comment was meant to be overheard. He wondered if she knew that Joséphine was part of the company or if she was merely commenting on the name and the fact that it had just been in the *Daily Prophet*. He chose to ignore Drusilla's comment.

The rest of the afternoon was much less dramatic as none of the other shop clerks made a fuss over his arrival. They stopped in Godric's Hollow, Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley, Dublin and Cardiff.

When they arrived back at Lucius' London office, Joséphine said. "Thank you for taking me to the shops. I have an idea of which ones I think would be appropriate, but I would like to think on it this evening."

He nodded his head. "Of course. If you had no other plans for dinner this evening, I would be pleased to recommend a restaurant and perhaps join you, as business associates," he added, almost as an afterthought to make sure that she did not harbor the sort of ideas that Elsa had.

"I would be honored for you to join me for dinner. Dining alone is not something I prefer. I find good company is as important as good cuisine."

"Excellent. I will let the advertising team know that we have returned and after a short respite, you can see what they have proposed." Again, he knew that technically the company was his, but he also knew that the Dupré family was doing a decent enough job running the company and he had no intention of alienating any of them. In order to maintain brand integrity, he would value any input the Duprés had.

"Thank you."

Lucius called his secretary into his office. "Caroline will assist you and show you to the conference room when you are ready."

By the time Lucius returned to the manor after dinner, he was feeling drained. It had been a long and busy day. He dropped his outer robes on the sofa in his study and walked to his desk to look through the post. He smiled as he saw a letter from Delilah. Nothing else in the post required his immediate attention, and he set it aside. With a wave of his wand he summoned the Scotch decanter and a glass. With a flick of his wrist, he magically poured two fingers of Scotch as he settled at his desk to read Delilah's letter.

As Lucius read the letter, he began to think that he could definitely use his sister's advice on his relationship with Hermione. While he could ask Connor, he knew that his friend did not have all the information. He could tell Delilah things that he would not even trust Connor to know.

After finishing reading her letter, he put quill to parchment and wrote a reply, letting her know that he would like to join her and Vittorio for dinner on Friday. He knew that it was short notice, but he also knew that the two of them enjoyed evenings at home. In addition to asking her for advice, he would use this trip to try to convince her was time for a visit to the manor. Besides, despite the long distance to Italy, it would be a welcome respite and relaxing. It would be a good start to a weekend during which he would not be seeing Hermione.

Lucius spent the rest of the week wrapping up the domestic details and appointing the proper people to oversee the final steps of the marketing agreement for Belle Déesse's re-launch into the British marketplace. Already the media blitz had started to build excitement. Lucius had no doubt that this would be a complete success. He had even overheard his secretary talking about it.

For now he was looking forward to visiting his sister and getting away from all the fuss. He picked up the small gift bag of Belle Déesse products and Disappeared.

When he arrived, he was warmly welcomed by Delilah and Vittorio, who assured him that he was always welcome.

Dinner was hearty and exactly what Lucius needed. His Italian was improving to the point that they barely used English during the meal. He could definitely understand why Delilah was happy with her life. Vittorio told him all about the harvest and how well it was going. It had been a very good year for their farm, and Vittorio was looking at expanding. The owner of the neighboring property was getting on in years and his children had no interest in the farm or vineyard. Vittorio had spent some time watching the grape harvest and crush and thought he was ready to try his hand at viticulture. Signor Russo was willing to stay on as Vintner for a few years.

Delilah looked as though she still wasn't entirely sold on Vittorio's latest plans. "The good news is that the vineyard is on the far side of the property from us so it would be easy enough to sell should winemaking not suit Vittorio."

Vittorio smiled proudly. "You should trust me. Have I made a bad decision yet?"

"No, but growing vegetables, olives and nuts and making wine are two entirely different things."

"And that's why Signor Russo will be staying on for a few years. I'm sure he has no desire to see me run his winery into ruin."

Lucius offered, "I am good friends with Monsieur Toussaint of Chateau Rouge. I could ask him to offer a consultation. While the varietals grown are different, he could provide advice on the wine making side."

This seemed to make Delilah feel much better. "I think that would be a wonderful idea. It couldn't hurt to have another vintner look things over."

Vittorio looked as though he were about to refuse.

"Vittorio, it will hurt nothing for him to visit. And he would merely be offering advice. And I'm sure he would be quite pleased to enjoy one of Delilah's dinners once I tell him how wonderful a cook she is," Lucius said. He knew that he normally tried not to flaunt his wealth and influence, but this was one favor he wanted to do for them.

"I will consider it and let you know." He rose from the table. "Now, it's late and the cows get up early." He bent down and gave Delilah a kiss. "I'll see you in the morning." He turned to Lucius, who had risen to his feet, and gave his brother-in-law a hug. "Buona notte."

"Buona notte and sleep well," Lucius replied. "Thank you again for your hospitality."

Once they were alone, Delilah focused her gaze on her brother. "I can tell that something's bothering you, and I presume you are here because you wanted to talk about it."

He smiled wanly at how transparent he was to Delilah, even after all these years. "I never could keep secrets from you, could I?" He paused a moment before continuing. After taking a deep breath, he said, "It's about the young witch I'm interested in. Events forced me to reveal my feelings to her even though her divorce is not final." He snorted. "They forced me to reveal them even before her hearing. While I am quite pleased that the attraction is mutual, the timing is most inopportune. Her closest friends were also his family, and I feel as though I am abandoning her in her greatest moment of need. To be around her... It was tolerable before when I could only fantasize that she felt the same way about me, but now... It's all I can do to maintain control knowing that if I were to kiss her, it would not stop there."

"Why did you have to reveal it now? Surely you could have waited a few more weeks?" Delilah asked curiously.

Lucius shook his head. "There is a coworker of hers that she has been spending a great deal of time with. From what I have observed, and this was through happenstance, not me trying to find out what she was doing, he seems to have some sort of romantic interest in her. While I could not say whether she returns that interest, she was quite flattered by his flirtatious behavior, and I would not risk losing her."

"So are you looking for advice or merely wanting to tell someone what was on your mind?"

He took a sip of his drink. "I don't know. There isn't really any advice to be given. She has taken a flat in Jinney Alley, someplace rather visible where my presence would be noticed. Inviting her to the manor..." He recalled her reaction when he had suggested she join him gardening. "Due to circumstances I don't wish to get into, is out of the question. She had been staying at the cottage, but even inviting her there is too much. I want nothing more than to be with her, but I know that it cannot be for the present." He leaned back in his chair before upending his glass and refilling it. "I dislike not being in control."

"No one has complete control of their life, Lucius. And this will sort itself out in time."

"I realize that, but what of her? Yes, I have told her that I care for her, and she understands that us spending time together is courting disaster, but what if it's not enough?"

"You're still concerned about this other wizard?"

"Of course I am. He will be a near daily presence in her life, well positioned to deepen their relationship." He took another deep draught of his drink. "He is younger, near her age she is quite a bit younger than me rather handsome, and they seem to have much in common."

"Even though she said she feels something for you? Lucius, I believe you are needlessly worrying."

"Am I? It is one thing to have a crush on someone..."

Delilah interrupted. "From what you have said, the two of you have developed a good friendship. I would say that is something more than a crush."

"But she also has a good friendship with this other fellow. What if there are also romantic feelings there? What if she comes to think I am too old for her? She spent the last few years of her marriage starved for attention, and now she will be getting it from this other fellow."

"Why don't you write her letters since you won't be able to spend time with her? Let her know how important she is to you and how much you can't wait until you can be together."

"I had already planned on that, but it doesn't seem as though it's enough."

"But it's really all you have."

He slumped in his chair. "It is. I suppose I should go."

"Why don't you stay here the weekend?" Delilah asked. "Unless you have other plans."

Lucius sighed. "No. No plans." It was unlikely he would have weekend plans until Hermione's divorce was final.

"I think you will find the farm therapeutic," she replied.

"Feeding chickens and milking cows is therapeutic?" he asked skeptically.

"You would be surprised. Come, I'll get you settled in the guest room. You can always change your mind in the morning."

"I'll have to return the favor of hosting you at my house," he replied. "I know that Draco and his family would like to see you again, and it's hard for him to find the time to get away."

"We'll see after the harvest is over. This is a very busy time with the extra farmhands to feed," she replied evasively.

Once settled in the guest room, Lucius drifted off to sleep almost immediately, overcome by exhaustion and drink.

A/N: As always, huge thanks to beaweasley2 for her assistance. I would also like to apologize for the delay between chapters. Real life is attacking both me and my beta right now.

The Looking Glass is a reference to the UK tabloid *The Daily Mirror*. Since it was originally known as *The Mirror* and so as not to have confusion with the *Daily Prophet*, there is no 'daily' in the title.

For those paying close attention, I went back and edited Ch 26 so that there is no clear location given for Hermione's flat. Many thanks to beaweasley2 for suggesting Jinney Alley. More information on where Jinney Alley got its name, look up The World's End Pub in Camden. They have a history section which outlines the legend behind Jinney Bingham or Mother Red Cap. <http://www.theworldsend.co.uk/index.php/history>

Marmoor Alley is a play on marmoreally which means 'relating to or suggestive of marble or a marble statue'. I thought it sounded sufficiently Scottish as well.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 of 29

Hermione continues to search for a new normal in her life without Ron and is trying to determine how Lucius fits in to everything.

On Saturday morning, Hermione rose early to move to her new flat. As Lucius had warned, he did not come over to see her during the week. She tried not to feel disappointed, but she had grown so used to having him around that she could not help but feel his absence.

She was pleased to see that her bookcases and kitchenware had been delivered. While the flat was sparsely furnished, it was really all she needed. It's not like she would be doing a lot of entertaining, and her small table could always be magically expanded if the need arose.

After unpacking, she took a quick trip to the market so that she would have something in the pantry.

On the way home, she went to the local owl post and sent a letter to Harry, inviting him and Ginny over as she has promised. He had told her previously that he would try to get away to come see her, but that he couldn't make any promises. Hermione knew that if Harry did come, it was unlikely Ginny would join him. She hated putting Harry in the middle of her fallout with Ron. This situation reminded her too much of times at Hogwarts when various aspects of their friendship would be strained, putting one or the other of them in the middle.

It was a little after lunch when there was a knock at her door. Even though she knew it was not likely to be Lucius, a part of her hoped it would be. When she opened the door and saw Harry, she turned her disappointment into surprise. "Harry, how wonderful to see you!"

"Hi, Hermione. Sorry Ginny couldn't make she just didn't feel it would be right," Harry apologized.

Hermione tried to smile pleasantly. "I understand," she said and stood aside so he could enter.

"So this is your new place?" he asked as he gave it a quick glance.

"It's not much, but really, it's all I need," she replied sheepishly, knowing what he'd think. A part of her really wanted to ask how Ron was doing, but she resisted, instead waiting for Harry to bring it up.

"How are you doing?" he asked as he took a seat and let her serve tea.

"Better now. It feels a bit like I've had a big weight has been lifted. I really wish that it hadn't had to happen that way. I wanted it to be an amicable split, but Ron had to have it his way. It would have been a non-event if he hadn't had to stir the hornet's nest." She had been shocked to see that their divorce had not made headlines. Of course, she thought that Lucius had something to do with that since he seemed to have a lot of sway at the *Daily Prophet*. Their divorce had been relegated to a small column at the bottom of the first page paper. And it had been covered by a new reporter who was still relatively unknown, instead of by someone like Rita Skeeter.

"You know, it was a bit of a personal affront to him when you filed for divorce," said Harry.

"I can realize that, but if he had been able to admit that perhaps we did rush into marriage and that things weren't great, we could have avoided a lot of the hurt feelings." She saw Harry was about to continue defending Ron. "Look, one of the magistrates asked him point blank why he thought we should stay married, and he couldn't even come up with an answer that question."

Harry looked a little deflated. "Oh. I didn't know that."

She smiled sympathetically. "I wouldn't expect him to admit that. Look, I really don't want to talk about the divorce. I'm trying to take advantage of this fresh start. If later on he wants to renew our friendship, I'm open to it. I never actually wanted to ruin our friendship, but well, he had other ideas. I love the Weasleys, and I never wanted to hurt

any of them. They were my wizarding family, and now I've ruined it." She stared sadly into her teacup, wanting to avoid Harry's gaze.

"We'll see. I'm sure you know that George and Angelina are siding with you, and even Ginny has started admitting that Ron can be clueless git. Molly... Well, you know how she is. It might take her a while, but I think she'll come around," Harry said optimistically.

Hermione thought about her future and knew that if she and Lucius did get together, the Weasleys might feel differently about her. Harry would probably feel differently about her as well, but time would tell. She might be driving away her friends in exchange for her personal happiness, but she hoped that they would eventually come to see what she had seen. "We'll see, but I'm not going to get my hopes up. I think that will make me feel better if things do work out." After a brief pause, she said, "It has been nice to be able to get out again. I really didn't like have to hole myself up."

"So, where were you hiding?" Harry asked curiously.

Knowing that Harry could track down the information if she didn't give it to him, she settled for telling him part of the truth. "I rented a secluded cottage. Nice little place."

"Then why did you decide to move here?" he asked curiously, glancing around again.

She hadn't anticipated that question. "It was a little more than I wanted to spend on rent, and I've actually grown used to living in a wizarding community." She wondered if he was being affected by Ron's paranoia about her seeing someone else.

"Yeah, I can understand that." After an awkward silence in which neither of them could come up with a topic of discussion, Harry finally asked, "Is there anything you need help with?"

"No, thanks. I think I'm pretty well settled. I appreciate you stopping by. Maybe we can meet for lunch one day or something?" she asked, hoping that in time, their friendship would go back to normal or at least not be as estranged.

"Sure, I'd like that," Harry replied. "Well, I should be getting back home if you don't need anything," Harry said by way of taking his leave.

Hermione saw him off and then decided she would slip out and do a little shopping to make her new flat look more like a home.

Over the next several weeks, Hermione started to feel more normal. After work she would still stop by the library most nights, but she seldom stayed until closing. Some nights she would go to a wizarding café for dinner and others she would go home and cook for herself. On Tuesdays, she and Gilles would meet at a Muggle café where they had both enjoyed the performance of a folk singer who they both agreed was vastly underrated. She was especially fond of those rare occasions when she would run into Lucius at the library, but that had only happened twice.

At first she wondered if he had changed his mind about her, especially since the society page was now speculating that he was interested in some French witch. At the magical news stand in Diagon Alley, both *The Looking Glass* and *Witch Weekly* routinely featured pictures of Lucius on the cover and seemed to enjoy insinuating that he had become quite the playboy, finally deciding to play the field and wondering when he might choose someone closer to home.

When Hermione had made an off-handed comment to Lucius about his newfound status as a modern day Casanova, he reminded her that she should not believe everything she read. She wanted to believe him, but she had seen a definite change in his demeanor over the last few months. Of course there was fact that he still smiled warmly at her when they 'ran into' each other in public. But a small part of her was beginning to wonder if she would just be another notch in his belt.

One thing Hermione had not counted on was the amount of attention wizards would pay her. She should have expected it since she was a rather famous witch, but when she was out, there was no shortage of wizards offering to buy her a drink. At first it was flattering, but it soon became tedious. After all, the divorce wasn't final, and the idea of being pursued by so many made her uncomfortable.

By the time the first four weeks of the waiting period were over, she was reconsidering her plan of spending time in the wizarding community. She supposed she should be pleased that she wasn't reviled. Oddly she even had witches coming up to her and praising her for being such a brave trailblazer, something she most definitely had not expected.

Due to the excessive unwanted male attention, she had started spending more time in the library which was exactly what she was doing tonight.

"What is a beautiful, young witch like you doing in a place like this on a Friday night?" asked Lucius suavely as he sat at her table.

She put down her book and smiled at him. "Escaping my admirers. You seem to be the only one who doesn't feel bad about bothering me here."

He feigned hurt. "Do you really find talking to me a bother?"

She gave him an exasperated look. "That's not what I mean and you know it."

He leaned closer to her and whispered, "Of course I do." He gave her a sly smile and a wink. "Why don't you join me for a drink rather than while away your Friday in the library?"

Her heart skipped a beat. "Are you serious?" She could hardly believe she had heard him correctly.

"Of course I am. I'd like to take you out for a drink, a little conversation, a better atmosphere." He waved his hand idly at the library, indicating it was a rather drab place.

"What would people think?" She knew the divorce was almost final and that she would be officially free in just a couple of short weeks, but she was worried about how it would appear if she was out with Lucius.

"People would think that an extremely handsome and eligible wizard had found a witch worthy of his attention," he said pompously.

His behavior caught her off guard, and she let out a little laugh. She never would have imagined that Lucius Malfoy had a playful side.

"Besides, we need to show the rest of the world a logical progression for our relationship. Join me." He held his hand out to her, and she finally accepted.

Rather than go to his club, they went to one of the nicer restaurants in Diagon Alley and enjoyed a drink at table in the bar. She did her best to behave as though this was a casual outing. She also tried to disregard the people watching them. Out of the corner of her eye, she could tell that the other patrons were scrutinizing them, trying to determine what was going on. Of course every time she turned her head, they quickly looked back at their drinks.

After the first drink, Lucius had suggested that they just have dinner together since it was getting late and there was no need for each of them to dine alone. She had to really admire the act he was putting on. What he said and the way he delivered it made it seem like such a natural progression.

That night she slept better than she had in a long time. The dinner had been lovely, and it felt liberating to be out in public on a date, even if it had not been a formal one.

The next morning she was enjoying a leisurely breakfast when there was an urgent knock on her door. Wondering who it could be so early in the morning, she grabbed her wand and asked, "Who is it?"

"Harry. Can I come in?"

She lowered her wand and opened the door for him. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Is it true that you had dinner with Lucius Malfoy last night?" he asked, sounding like he was beginning an interrogation at work.

"Yes, what of it?" She knew that getting this out in the open with Harry would have to happen sooner or later, and she might as well get him used to the idea now.

Harry looked at her quizzically. "Lucius Malfoy? What were you thinking?"

"We started having a chat at the library, realized that's not the best place for a chat, so we decided to continue the conversation over a drink. When we realized how late it was, we decided we might as well grab a bite to eat," she explained simply.

"At a rather fancy restaurant," Harry quipped.

Hermione shrugged, trying to keep calm. "That's where we were having drinks, it made sense. Look, I didn't choose the place. He probably goes there all the time and likes it. It really has a nice atmosphere."

"Oh, I don't even know where to start," Harry said as he started pacing.

"It was dinner, Harry. It wasn't a date or anything, just two people being friendly." She knew that she couldn't let Harry know their friendship had been building over the last several months. "I've run into him in the library before. In fact, that was where he offered me the job."

"Okay, let's start there. He's your boss, or have you forgotten?" Harry protested.

"I work for his company, not him directly, so he technically isn't my boss, but why are we discussing this anyway?" She had known that Harry wouldn't readily accept her relationship with Lucius, but she was surprised at how vehemently he was opposing the two of them being together.

"Your divorce isn't final, and you are out with a guy in public!" Harry shouted.

"I would think that you of all people would realize that just because two people of opposite sexes are out together doesn't mean they are couple. You and I have been out before and no one thinks anything is going on between us. Besides, it's not like I'm planning on getting back together with Ron."

"That's different," he protested.

"Why? Because we've known each other for so long? Am I not allowed to make new friends?" She could tell that Harry's argument was running out of steam.

"So you consider him a friend?" Harry asked in disbelief.

She considered her answer carefully. "We've had a few conversations and have quite a few things in common, so yes, I would consider him a friend."

Harry finally stopped nervously pacing and put his hands on her shoulders. "You know I want you to be happy, but even if he has reformed, Malfoy is a very powerful and dangerous wizard."

"Trust me, I know that. It's just that folks willing to be friendly with me have been few and far between lately. He doesn't judge me for my decision to divorce and is supportive of me. Perhaps it's because of all he's been through. I could really use all the friends I can get right now, and he's there for me." She hoped that she wasn't giving too much away about how deep their friendship had grown. "How did you find out about this anyway?" she asked, finally wondering who had told Harry.

He pulled out copies of the *Hogsmeade Herald* and *The Looking Glass*, which were both folded over to the appropriate pages. There was a small blurb under the photo in the *Hogsmeade Herald* by Rita Skeeter:

Noted Lothario, Lucius Malfoy, was spotted last night sharing an intimate dinner with Hermione Weasley, who is in the process of divorcing her husband, war hero Ron Weasley. Which British beauty will be on his list next? And what does he find so captivating about her?

"Naturally the article in *The Looking Glass* is much more elaborate," he stated, showing her the tabloid, "but it'll probably be picked up by *Witch Weekly*, too. At least it hasn't been printed in the *Daily Prophet*."

"Oh, that woman!" Hermione exclaimed as she scrunched the paper in her hands. "The dinner was hardly intimate. We were sitting at a table in the middle of the restaurant for all to see. And how can you trust anything she writes?" she asked as she thwapped him with the paper. "Honestly, I thought you knew better."

"I do, and that's why I came over to see you."

She could see the concern in his face. "Well, thanks for looking out for me and letting me clear up the truth. Maybe next time you can just start with the newspaper, and we can discuss the article like rational adults rather than me having to deal with an interrogation?" She just wished he had been a bit less adversarial in his approach.

"Would you go out with him?" Harry asked after a long silence.

Hermione considered how to answer the question. "I don't know. Maybe. I'd have to get to know him better because he is Lucius Malfoy, after all." She laughed softly, hoping to diffuse the tension a little. There was no need for Harry to know that over the past few months she had been spending a great deal of time with Lucius. "He was charming and attentive last night; I won't deny that. And it feels good to get that sort of attention. He treated me like I've seen you treat Ginny. So I guess that yes, I would go out with him. After what just happened, I want to take my time to really get to know someone and make sure we are on the same page."

"Not to mention he's Draco's dad," Harry added.

"Yes. That could be a little..." she paused trying to think of a good word, "uncomfortable." Oddly, prior to this moment, she had never really considered the age difference. It was easy to forget that he was Draco's father because they had so much in common and he had aged well.

Harry shuddered. "I just want to make sure he doesn't take advantage of you. You've been through a lot and he's shrewd."

She appreciated his concern. "Unlike some of the other wizards who have been asking to go out with me, I don't know that he would gain anything from being in a relationship me. I mean he is still the wealthiest wizard in Britain and has a great deal of political might. I think the others are trying to date me because they want to be able to brag to their friends that they had one of the war heroes. He doesn't strike me as *that* type."

"Yeah, true. I just want you to be careful," he said gently.

"I'll be fine. I think I need some time to myself before I go looking for another relationship." She felt a little guilty about deceiving Harry like this, but she knew it was what he wanted to hear.

"Alright. How about we try to get together for lunch sometime this week?"

"That sounds like a great idea, Harry."

After he was gone, she threw the papers against the door. She should have expected Rita, but now... She knew that they would have to be very careful since Rita could easily hide anywhere when she was a beetle.

For a brief moment she thought of sending Lucius a letter by owl, but then she remembered him talking about how they would have to go public at some point. And it was not like the wizarding world was unaware of how Rita Skeeter could stretch the truth. Instead she decided to wait it out.

Knowing the new books arrived at Flourish and Blotts on Saturdays, she decided to see what there was at the bookstore. One of the things she liked about the store was that along with new books, they also put out new acquisitions in the rare books section. That was her favorite section to browse.

When she arrived, she was surprised to find Lucius browsing the rare book section. "Mr. Malfoy, good to see you," she said, mindful of the other people in the shop.

"Hermione, a pleasure, and please, call me Lucius. I trust that you enjoyed yourself last night?" he asked genially.

"I did. It was nice to not have to eat dinner alone." She paused a moment before adding quietly, "I'm sure you noticed Rita Skeeter has struck again."

He frowned. "Yes. Apparently there is nothing else worthy for her to discuss." He then smiled at her. "I'm glad you enjoyed dinner. Now, I won't keep you any longer from your browsing." He nodded at her and moved to a different part of the section.

She found herself glancing at him from time to time. A part of her wanted to ask him if he wanted to get lunch somewhere, but she felt awkward asking that. She hoped that he would ask her, even though she knew that being seen two days in a row with him, especially in light of Rita's article, could lead to more gossip, but she did not care.

After searching through the shelves, she found two books she was interested in and went to the counter, only to find Lucius already there. He nodded and smiled warmly at her before finishing his transaction. When she finished she noticed him lounging off to the side. She did not think she had ever seen someone look so perfectly at home at some place that was not home.

"Are you waiting for someone?" she asked.

He pointed at the top book she had purchased. "Interesting choice. I have several other books by the same author and thought you might be interested in discussing Phineas Brown. Perhaps over lunch since it is that time of day?" he asked optimistically.

She had to admire his skill at manipulating a situation. "So you know something about Mr. Brown?"

"Join me for lunch and you'll see," he replied playfully.

"How can I resist such charm?" she retorted and let him lead her to a café for lunch.

Over lunch they really did discuss Phineas Brown and actually got into quite a debate over some of his writing. She found the whole conversation wonderful because she had found someone she could have an intellectual conversation with.

After two hours, she realized how much time had passed. "Goodness, I think we've hogged the table long enough. I really do have to thank you for the wonderful discussion."

"It was my pleasure. Though it is a shame to end such a stimulating conversation. I look forward to doing it again," he said, smiling softly at her.

"I'd like that. Well, goodbye, Lucius," she said shyly, mindful that they were in public and he was unlikely to show her any affection.

"Good day, Hermione."

After a long week of work, Hermione was out at Diagon Alley, having just purchased a new quill as her old one had broken. At first she had felt a tinge of sadness, but then she had remembered it had been gift from Ron and it was best that she just purge items like that from her life.

On her way back to the Leaky Cauldron, she spied Gilles, who had a big bag with WWW emblazoned on it.

He saw her and waved to her so she decided to join him.

"Planning on causing some mischief at work?" she asked causally.

He smiled and chuckled. "No. Something to spice up a stag night. Have you eaten lunch yet? I was about to look for someplace and wonder if you would like to join me."

"No, er, I mean I haven't eaten yet, and yes, I'd like to join you." She decided to suggest someplace public, rather than risk him choosing a more intimate venue. "How about the Leaky Cauldron since we're headed that direction?"

"Of course," Gilles replied, with a hint of disappointment in his voice.

When they arrived, Hermione chose a table in the center area of the room. They enjoyed a pleasant lunch and chatted amicably about whatever came to mind.

"So, enjoying your new found freedom by quill shopping?" Gilles asked playfully, having taken notice of her bag.

Hermione laughed. "I don't know how much I'd call it freedom. I seem to have become quite popular with the wizards." She heaved a sigh. "It's really quite pathetic watching them try to come up with something witty. You would think they would at least wait until the divorce is final."

"Is it really that bad?" Gilles asked with a slight smile. "I would think the fact they accept your decision would be welcome."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm glad they aren't ignoring me or spitting on me, but it can get bit overwhelming. I don't mind cooking my own dinner, but there are times I like to eat out just to be around other people. For some reason, they seem to take that as open invitation to strike up conversation."

He reached across the table and put his hand on hers. "Well, if you ever need a dinner companion, let me know."

"I will. Though I don't generally make my plans too far ahead of time, and I would feel guilty monopolizing all your free time. Surely you and your mates hang out."

"It would not be a bother. It would be repaying a favor. I know how isolated I felt when I first started working here and you helped me feel welcome," he said as his thumb gently caressed her hand.

She gently slipped her hand out from under his so she could finish eating her lunch. "I know how hard it is fitting in somewhere new and trying to make friends." She glanced at the clock on the wall. "I really should get going. My mum is expecting me this afternoon. I'll see you at work on Monday."

"See you Monday," he replied.

She dropped a few Knuts and Sickles on the table, enough to take care of her part of the bill, before leaving. When she returned home, she began to wonder if she was being direct enough with Gilles, because needed him to understand that what they had was nothing more than a friendship. She had hoped that by showing a lack of interest, she could preserve the friendship without hurting his feelings, but now she wasn't entirely sure.

The next couple of weeks were filled with 'chance' encounters with Lucius that she did not believe for a moment were chance. After all, she had gone years without running into Lucius once and now she bumped into him every few days.

She stared at the invitation that had come by owl a week previously. With all the fuss of the divorce, she had completely forgotten that it was nearly Halloween. The Ministry was holding a gala and as a hero of the war and prominent citizen, she had been invited. And since this was one more event commemorating the fifth anniversary of Voldemort's defeat, she was expected to be at the head table with Ron and Harry. She was sure that she would be seated at the opposite end of the table from Ron, but she really had no desire to go, especially since she would likely be going alone.

She had been trying to determine a good excuse for not going, but had yet to come up with anything. She sighed and scratched out the latest excuse she had devised and was desperately trying to think of another when there was the unmistakable sound of an owl at her window. She saw it was the Malfoy eagle owl and took its letter, tossing it an owl treat before it left.

Meet me at the cottage.

It wasn't signed, but there was only one person who would be using that owl. Quickly trying to tame her hair and smooth out her clothes, she Disapparated to the cottage and found him waiting for her in the drawing room.

He held out a piece of parchment to her. "A present for you, my dear," he said as he smiled warmly at her.

"A present?" she asked curiously as she took the parchment and read it in surprise. "But this isn't supposed to be final until next Tuesday!" she said in shock as she read the divorce decree.

"True, but with Halloween coming and its ensuing increased workload, I managed to persuade the Magistrates that a few days would not make a difference since neither of you has made an effort at reconciliation. In fact, Mr. Weasley has been seen in the company of several different witches." He took a step closer to her.

She was not sure how she felt about that, but she realized that Lucius was the one for her so there was no need for her to consort with other wizards. "Thank you," she said. She could feel her heart pounding her chest. She wasn't sure what to do next, but Lucius solved that problem when he swept her into his arms for a passionate kiss that took her breath away.

"Oh my," she whispered breathily.

He chuckled softly. "That has to be the most unusual reaction that I have ever received."

"I'm sorry. I just... I wasn't expecting it, but now that I am..." She put her hands on his cheeks and pulled him down for another kiss. This one was even better because she was prepared for it.

"Very good," he purred. "Now then, there is one more matter of business to discuss. You have not yet RSVPed for the Halloween Gala. You need to do so it is expected of you to attend."

She sighed. "I know that, but *he's* going to be there, and I don't want to go alone. As much as I would love for you to be my escort, that probably would not be appropriate."

He chuckled. "No, not hardly. Surely you must have some other male acquaintance who would go with you."

"I don't really have a lot of male friends and the only one who's talking to me is married."

"Why not ask one of your coworkers? Just make it clear he is only there so that you have an escort. Once there... Well, you may find someone else you want to spend your time with," he said with a sly grin as he traced his hand down her cheek.

"Are you serious? At the gala?" She could not believe he was suggesting they get together at one of the biggest wizarding gatherings since the war. It would be very public and everyone would definitely be talking about them as a couple if they spent any time together at the ball.

"What better place?" he asked as he took her right hand in his left and put his right arm behind her waist and started dancing with her.

Dancing with him felt so natural, and she just couldn't say no to him. "I suppose Gilles would like to come. He was lamenting not getting an invitation," she finally replied.

After a brief pause, Lucius said, "Then you can send him an owl tomorrow morning. But tonight we are going to have a celebratory dinner."

The day of the gala arrived and Hermione was a nervous mess. She had not seen Lucius since they had said their farewells after the celebratory dinner. She still felt a bit disappointed about how that evening had gone not because she was finally a free woman, but because Lucius was steadfastly insisting on remaining celibate until their relationship was out in the open.

She knew that he had a point about the whole nature of their relationship changing once they were intimate, but she had been imagining it for so long that she could hardly stand being around him without acting on her feelings, especially now that the divorce was final. And the kisses they had shared had not made it any easier. They had only left her wanting more. She had to admire his restraint.

As expected, Gilles had gladly agreed to escort her to the gala. He was a bit nervous about sitting at the head table, but he knew that it was the only way he was going to attend. He had seemed a bit disappointed when she said there were no strings attached after dinner was over.

She stared at the two dresses she had narrowed her choices down to. She wanted to look sexy, but not too provocative and she thought these dresses fit the bill. One was a very elegant black dress and the other a deep emerald green.

After trying them both on, she decided she liked the cut of the green one better. Besides, it really made the green flecks in her brown eyes stand out. She gave a quick twirl before the mirror and was sure she had made the correct choice.

It took her more than an hour to tame her hair into submission until she was happy with it. That's one thing that magic seemed to be of limited use. Her hair just did not respond well to magic.

Gilles arrived just as she put the finishing touches on her ensemble. When she opened the door, she had a pleasant smile on her face. "Good evening, Gilles. I'm ready."

He was dumbstruck at the transformation from the Hermione he normally saw at work. "Vous semblez beau." *

She could not help blushing. "Merci. Just remember, you are only obligated to stay with me through dinner. I know there will plenty of eligible young witches who will be eager for your attention."

"If you're sure," he replied, though he sounded a little disappointed.

"I'll be fine." She knew that she would be spending the evening alone, even if he did not.

He held his arm out to her to Apparate them both.

She never liked Side-Along and said, "If you don't mind, I'd like to Apparate myself. Side-Along Apparition just makes me feel a bit off."

"Of course. Just trying to be a gentleman. See you there," he said and was gone with a pop.

Hermione joined him at the Ministry, and they commenced the obligatory cocktail hour. She had wanted to arrive late, but she knew that Gilles would want the full experience so they showed up about ten minutes after everything had started so that they would not be the first ones there.

Owing to his bright red hair, Hermione spotted Ron right away and was a bit surprised to see Lavender Brown on his arm. Hermione was surprised that Lavender had not yet married, but given that she was not, she was not entirely surprised to see her hanging on Ron's arm, giggling at his every comment. A quick glance around the room did not reveal Lucius, and she felt a slight pang of disappointment. She could only assume that he was going for the fashionably late entrance.

She chatted mindlessly with people as she waited for the dinner and ceremony, careful to avoid being anywhere near Ron. She smiled and nodded at Harry who was with a very pregnant Ginny. She was surprised that Ginny was even attending, but she had to admit that Ginny looked very radiant and had no shortage of people coming to see her.

Shortly before the dinner portion was to begin, she saw Lucius looking as dapper as ever in perfectly tailored dress robes with his hair neatly pulled back, and she realized she preferred it loose. He caught her eyes and gave her a small nod of approval, but made no effort to approach her. Before she could make her way to where he was, the call for seating for dinner came.

Dinner was the pomp and circumstance she had come to expect. Thankfully she and Ron were on opposite sides of the table, as she had expected. The sight of Ron and Lavender really playing it up made her lose her appetite, though she knew she had to eat given the amount of wine she was drinking. She made small talk with Kingsley as Gilles was utterly flabbergasted by the amount of attention the head table was getting.

Finally came the time for speeches of gratitude, and Hermione did her best to look interested. Every once and a while she made sly glances about the room, so as not to appear as if she were watching Lucius in the audience, and noticed that he was doing a very good job of looking interested in the proceedings without drawing too much attention to himself. She didn't want to tip her hand, since the surviving members of both Dumbledore's Army and the Order of the Phoenix were all there. Besides, later when she danced with Lucius she knew they would start a stir. Unsurprisingly Draco was there, well unsurprisingly to her since this was also a gathering of important people in the wizarding world.

When the speeches were over, everyone clapped vigorously, and she was sure it had nothing to do with the content of the speeches. Everyone was then asked to clear the room for five minutes while it was reconfigured for the ball.

While they were waiting, Harry came over and said his goodbye to her. Hermione had hoped to speak to Ginny, but she wasn't surprised that it did not happen in such a public forum. A part of Hermione wished she could duck out. Before she could act on that feeling, they were called back into the ballroom. Gilles offered her his arm to escort her into the ballroom, though she had seen him flirting with several other young ladies who were clearly impressed by his station at the head table. They had agreed that he would take the first dance with her and then his obligation would be discharged.

The dance with Gilles was quite nice as he was incredibly graceful and guided her expertly around the dance floor. She then shared dances with Neville Longbottom and Seamus Finnegan, which were not as effortless as her dance with Gilles. It was good to see her old Gryffindor classmates and know that they did not hold anything against her. She then danced once with Sturgis Podmore, a member of the Order who wanted to show her his support, followed by Warren Westenberg, a wizard who'd been loyal to the Order of the Phoenix, and also with Frank Pankhurst, who worked in Magical Transportation. Ray Headley, a wizard she used to work with in the Ministry asked her next, and she was surprised he was so cordial considering how friendly he was with Mr. Weasley. She was finally starting to work her way off the dance floor when she came face to face with Lucius.

Note: *Vous semblez beau* you look lovely

Many thanks to my lovely reader, beaweasley2, for all her assistance. Also thank, you dear readers, for your patience. I know this update has been a long time coming. Life can be such an inconvenience to the fun. The muses also decided to take a short break once the kiddos finished fall break, which did not help. I currently estimate about 10 more chapters (which are written to some degree) and an epilogue (which is written in it's entirety). Again, thank you all for your patience and your reviews. The muses enjoy feedback.

Just a little bit of useless trivia, this is now the longest fic that I have ever posted and it's still going. A very proud moment for me.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 of 29

At the Halloween Gala, Lucius finally makes his desires known.

Lucius looked himself over in the mirror and picked off one last piece of lint. Everything was perfect. Some might accuse him of preening, but he had always prided himself on his appearance and everyone expected him to be impeccably dressed.

He knew that some might question why he was attending alone, but most would recognize that he still was not dating following Narcissa's passing. Of course, that was all about to change tonight. Witches who had shown restraint because he was still in mourning, would no longer show that restraint. But none of it mattered to him there was only one witch whose attention he sought. And he intended to ensure that he received it.

While he was not one to blindly believe what was written in the gossip pages, he knew that there was always a kernel of truth hidden within the embellishments. And Rita Skeeter had been reporting that Hermione had been spending time with Gilles outside of work. While he did not believe the details of the conversation, since Rita had reported it had been in French and he doubted her fluency, it did bother him that this was the same wizard Hermione had invited to the Gala. While she might see him as nothing more than a coworker, that did not mean that Gilles saw her the same way. No matter what assurances she might give him, he still saw the younger wizard as his rival for her affections.

That was one of the reasons he had secured her divorce early and invited her to a celebratory dinner. He wanted to ensure that he had her attention. The kisses they had shared should definitely have been enough to let her know what his desires towards her were.

He caught a glint of gold in the mirror as he checked his appearance and looked at the gold band circling his ring finger. Narcissa had placed it there twenty-seven years, four months and nineteen days ago. He could remember his wedding as though it had happened yesterday. The only time it had been removed since was during his

incarceration. When he had been released, she had returned the ring to its rightful place. This ring, this symbol of their love had kept him alone for the last three years. It was time to end that isolation. Slowly he took the ring off his finger and gripped it tightly in his hand, squeezing his eyes shut to regain control of his emotions. "It's time," he whispered. He then placed his ring next to Narcissa's in the jewelry box and closed the lid.

Checking the clock on the mantle he saw that the cocktail hour was nearly over, and it was time for him to make his arrival. He did not do this for any dramatic reason, but merely because he knew his presence was not entirely welcome despite the role Narcissa had played in bringing the Dark Lord down. Never mind the fact that he had essentially been a wandless prisoner following his release from Azkaban by the Death Eaters and had done nothing to directly aid the Dark Lord.

He rubbed his forearm, feeling the phantom pain, remembering the Dark Mark and everything he had been compelled to do as a result of that Mark. He had been young during the first rise and compelled by his father to toe the line and join the Death Eaters. All his life he had been taught that only the pure deserved to be in the wizarding world, and the Dark Lord was supposed to see that it was finally achieved. It had been an easy choice for him and his friends to take up the Dark Lord's cause.

Of course the Dark Lord had failed, but at that time there had been no shift in public sentiment towards those with Muggle heritage like there had been this time. He had still adhered to what he had been taught in his youth pureblood supremacy. When the Dark Lord rose again, he had been forced to action. After all, once one entered the Dark Lord's service, you could not leave it.

He pushed those thoughts from his mind. He was a different wizard now, changed by his experiences during the second rise, by his year in prison, and it was time for him to make his appearance.

When he arrived at the Ministry, he had to make expected small talk with various members of the Ministry and industry. He did catch sight of Hermione and found her absolutely stunning. She was wearing an amazing dark green dress accented with simple silver jewelry. The dress hugged her every curve and announced to everyone that she did not consider her life over despite the divorce. He was proud of the boldness of the statement her clothes made, and he gave her a nod of approval when he caught her eye. He disapproved of her choice of escort, however. He thought that Gilles was paying her entirely too much attention, especially now that she knew how Lucius felt about her.

While he knew that she probably desired his company, now was not the time. He had his plan for the evening, and he would find her when the time was right.

During dinner, those at his table engaged in the sort of small talk that was the norm at this sort of function. After many years of practice, he had come to excel at this type of inane conversation. Throughout dinner and the ensuing interminable speeches, he kept flicking his gaze to Hermione, cautious of how much time that he did spend watching her.

He bided his time while the room was reset, careful to keep his distance from her. Once they were allowed back in the ballroom, he kept his distance from Hermione, dancing occasionally with the wives of important clients and certain Ministry officials, allowing her to share the first few dances with her friends.

When he saw that no one else was approaching her, he made his way through the dance floor to her until he was directly in her path. "May I have the pleasure of this dance?" he asked cordially when she stopped in front of him.

She looked longingly into his eyes. "Of course," she replied as she smiled warmly.

As the music started, he took hold of her hand and began guiding her around the dance floor. He saw her get lost in his eyes and the whole ballroom seemed to be theirs. Their dancing was effortless as she gave herself to him to follow his lead.

They danced the next song, Lucius giving anyone who had thoughts of breaking in a possessive glare. After their third dance together, he leaned close and whispered in her ear, "I think it's time to take a break."

She nodded in agreement, and he led her off the floor to a table near the back of the room where she fanned herself with a program while he went to get refreshments.

It did not take him long to get two glasses of Champagne. When he began walking back to where she was waiting, he noticed Ron Weasley standing before her, his body language exuding disapproval, and he frowned.

When he closed on the former couple, he put a pleasant smile on his face and handed her a glass of Champagne, saying warmly, "For you, my dear," and then turned to Ron the smile fading from his face. "Mr. Weasley," he said curtly as he stood protectively behind Hermione, placing his hand on her shoulder.

Ron glared at Lucius. "Get your hand off her," he demanded.

Hermione placed her hand over Lucius', signaling him not to remove it. "Ron, I think you should get back to your date. We aren't married anymore, and I can spend my time with whomever I please, and it pleases me to spend time with Lucius."

Ron was livid. "You can do a hell of a lot better than Lucius Malfoy!"

Lucius noticed a few of the nearby people staring at them.

"I won't have you causing trouble tonight, and you're making a scene," Hermione said coldly, keeping her volume low but firm. "This is a time of celebration and remembrance. Please go enjoy the evening with your date."

Ron looked between them a few times before he fixed his eyes on Lucius. "If you do anything to harm her, I'll make sure you live to regret it," he growled before leaving.

Lucius chuckled softly as he took the seat next to Hermione. "Charming, he truly is charming," he said sardonically. He knew that was likely to be first of many confrontations he would face from her friends as their relationship progressed.

"I don't want to talk about him," she replied simply before sipping her Champagne.

"Understandable. You are a lovely dancer, my dear," he said as he clinked his glass with hers. "Once we have rested, I would enjoy the honor of your company on the dance floor again." Actually he would have preferred leaving the ball altogether, but that was not an option without drawing the wrong sort of attention.

"I thought you would never ask," she said. "I'm glad you're here. You make this evening bearable."

"I could say the same for you," he replied softly as he gave her hand a gentle squeeze, mindful that he not be too overt in displaying his affections.

Lucius was rather restrained the rest of the evening, standing aside to allow her to dance with her old schoolmates and former Ministry coworkers. He did his best to maintain his pleasant demeanor when she shared another dance with Gilles. Only twice more did he dance with her, retaining her company for three songs both times, pushing the expected norm of decency. At one point he noticed Draco watching them with a look of shock on his face, but he really did not care what anyone thought, not even his son.

As the evening wound down, Lucius gently led Hermione aside. "I hope that you will permit me to escort you home this evening."

"Of course. It has been a long evening, and I think it's time to leave anyway," she said, and he liked the hint of hopefulness in her tone.

He escorted her to the Apparition area and took them both to her flat. Once there, he pressed her against the door and gave her a passionate kiss. He was pleased to note that she was panting when the kiss ended.

"Did you want to come in?" she asked as she gained her composure.

"Yes, I want to, but I think it best if I don't. Our behavior at the ball garnered enough attention, and no need to set the gossips afire. I'll send you a letter." He knew that if he went into her flat, he would not be leaving until morning, and it was likely that someone would notice. With the ink barely dry on her divorce, that was not the sort of thing she needed in the paper.

He could tell that she tried not to look too disappointed. "Of course. I look forward to hearing from you."

He leaned down to give her another kiss. "Until later, my love," he said as he brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. He then Disappeared in a silent swish of his robes.

Despite the sexual frustration of the previous night, Lucius woke in a good mood. After all, there was no reason to hide his affections for Hermione any longer. After his morning routine, he prepared to go downstairs for a nice quiet breakfast and then he would send a letter to Hermione inviting her to dinner.

He opened his bedroom door to find Draco standing there with an angry look on his face and the *Daily Prophet* in his hand.

"How could you?" Draco demanded.

Acting as though he had no idea what his son was referencing, he adjusted his cuffs and asked innocently, "How could I what?"

Draco shoved the paper in Lucius' face, and he saw that there was a picture of him and Hermione dancing included in the pictures from previous night's ball. Deciding to be evasive until Draco asked a specific question, he took the paper and walked towards the stairs so that he could partake of breakfast. "It was a ball and it was expected for attendees to actually dance."

"That's not what I mean and you know it." Draco stopped his father as they went down the stairs, grabbed the paper and pointed at the picture. "That is a lot more than just a casual dance. Not to mention the fact that you danced with her several times during the night."

"I thought you wanted me to start dating again," Lucius said as he walked around Draco and continued down the stairs.

"But but her?" Draco protested, clearly at a loss for words as he followed Lucius to the breakfast room.

"Why not her?" asked Lucius as he sat down and laid his napkin on his lap, waiting for his breakfast to be delivered. "She is ambitious, highly intelligent and quite attractive."

Draco sat in the opposite chair and waved off the house-elf that tried to bring him breakfast. "But you could have *anyone* and you pick Granger."

"And I ask you again, why not her?" Lucius was perfectly calm and composed as he ate his breakfast, rather enjoying Draco's overreaction.

Draco looked as though he was on the verge of an apopleptic fit. "She's my age! She was my classmate at Hogwarts."

"I don't see how that's an issue. It is very common for a wizard to marry a younger witch. In fact, I was the first Malfoy in quite some time to marry a witch near to my age. Not that it matters at the moment as I believe that any discussion of marriage would be quite premature."

"But you aren't ruling it out, are you?" Draco asked pointedly.

Lucius knew that this discussion was pointless. While Draco was not aware of the fact, he had already made up his mind. "Draco, I fail to see how my love life is any of your concern," Lucius said dryly.

"What about the family name!" Draco nearly shouted.

"Manners, my boy, manners. I know you were raised better than that. And what of it? I thought we had both progressed beyond the point where blood was used as a measure of a person. Besides, Hermione is a heroine to most of the wizarding world."

Draco leaned forward. "I'm talking about the divorce. Look at what happened to Aunt Delilah," Draco whispered.

"There is no need to whisper. And it is hardly fair to compare this to what happened to Delilah. I would say that Hermione's reputation came off quite intact. I believe that everyone's behavior last night shows that she is not a pariah, so I hardly see where scandal could come from. If her situation were scandalous, I doubt the Minister of Magic would have danced with her." He took a sip of his tea.

Draco gave him a calculating look. "How long have you been planning this?"

Lucius arched an eyebrow. "Is everything a ploy to you?"

"You just seem to have this very well plotted out: contacting Delilah, having an answer to all my questions," Draco said probingly.

Draco was definitely his father's son. "As I am sure you are aware, we dined together the other week. We learned we enjoy each other's company, and it is only natural that I would consider the ramifications of marriage if I am considering dating someone." He stared at Draco for a moment. "Would you prefer I choose someone whose only interest in me is how quickly they can spend the family fortune?"

Draco slumped back in his chair, admitting defeat. "No, but, Father, Granger?"

Lucius smiled. "For now our relationship is in its infancy. It is a bit premature to make assumptions about what will happen. After all, the two of us do have a bit of a tumultuous past."

"That's the other thing. I just can't believe that she would..." Draco trailed off as though realizing the hole he was digging for himself.

Lucius chuckled at his son's discomfort. "She has an excellent mind, and an open one at that. And of course I am very persuasive." He grinned slyly.

Draco gave his father a calculating look. "So what do you get out of a union with her?" he asked as though he was trying to determine what sort of advantage his father could gain.

"Happiness," Lucius replied truthfully.

"Happiness?" Draco asked incredulously.

"What else do I need? Business is booming. I have been restored to the wizarding world's good graces." He watched his son expectantly.

Rather than replying, Draco pushed the chair back and rose to his feet. "I should be getting back to Astoria and the inn."

"A pleasure chatting with you, Draco, and I'll send you an owl you about dinner later this week," Lucius called out as his son left. He smiled victoriously as he finished his meal. Draco had been easily handled, much more so than he had expected. And something told him that it would not be long before he saw Connor.

Lucius had been correct. Connor sent a letter by owl saying he was coming by around ten o'clock. And that was the first of many owls. As the letters were delivered to him, he saw the names of various pureblood, single witches. There were also a couple of letters from fathers offering their daughters since he seemed to be interested in a younger witch.

He opened a few for the entertainment value, and they were all similar. Each witch tried to make her case about why she deserved to be the next Mrs. Malfoy more than Hermione. Several referred to Hermione as a Mudblood, and he made note of who sent those letters, but most followed the standard formula of telling how pure their families were.

Strangely, he even received a letter from a woman offering to divorce her husband. He found that a bit disturbing and tucked that one away for safekeeping. After all, knowledge was power, and you never knew when information would come in handy.

Most he left in an unopened stack to be dealt with later. He had not realized how many eligible witches he would have throwing themselves at his feet. He shuddered at the thought of what would greet him at the next social event he attended.

When Connor arrived, he stacked the letters on his desk and instructed the house-elves to collect the rest and deliver them after dinner.

Connor took one look at the stack of letters and said, "That didn't take long. So what are you going to do about them?"

"Nothing. Hopefully a lack of reply will indicate my lack of interest," Lucius replied.

"You don't really believe that, do you?" Connor asked skeptically.

Lucius sighed. "No, not in the least. I'm sure that as soon as I show my face in public, they'll be fawning all over me. Tea?"

"No, thank you."

"Something stronger, then?" Lucius asked as he went to the bar and poured himself a Scotch.

"It is a bit early, but I'll take some brandy." He took the proffered glass and sat on the sofa while Lucius leaned against the bar. "The two of you really seemed to be having a good time last night. I *almost* believed that you hadn't planned it all out."

Lucius arched eyebrow. "You accuse me of planning the evening?"

Connor chuckled quietly. "That was too perfect for you to have not planned it. Of course, I'm sure I'm the only one who felt that way since no one else knew how you felt about her. Oh, you should have seen the looks on everyone's faces." Connor laughed. "Venus Gibbon looked to be on the verge of fainting. And quite a few even sent their dates to try to cut in on you, but that glare of yours is quite menacing."

"I have spent years perfecting that glare." Lucius couldn't help smirking at the idea of standing the wizarding world on its head.

"Quite a bit of gossip as well. I'm surprised there was nothing more than the photo in the paper this morning."

"I'm not," Lucius replied as he grinned knowingly.

"Must be nice being you," Connor waxed. "So what now?"

"I ignore the harpies and continue courting Hermione," he replied matter-of-factly.

"I hope you warned her about what she's getting herself into," Connor said soberly.

"After the howlers she received following her divorce, I think she can handle herself. And we have discussed the fact that quite a few women are interested in dating me." Lucius had no doubt that Hermione knew what she was getting into. After all, she was a very bright witch.

"Well, I would have been over this morning, but Felicia was after me for information. I hope you don't mind, but I told her what I knew well, not everything, but enough to satisfy her curiosity so that she would let me leave the house," Connor said apologetically.

"So what doesn't she know?" Lucius asked pointedly.

"Well, I glossed over the fact that you ran into her while you were on vacation, but she knows the two of you have been friendly for some time. As far as she's concerned, you were quietly pining away for Hermione during the divorce process and being a good boy and waiting until it was finalized."

"And that would be the truth," Lucius replied simply.

Connor arched an eyebrow. "I find that hard to believe given the way the two of you were looking at each other during the evening."

"I assure you I was the perfect gentleman and never gave her so much as a kiss until her divorce was final." Of course there had been a few close calls, but he had maintained his composure and done nothing that would jeopardize their future.

Connor gave him a look that said he still wasn't quite sure he believed Lucius, but he did not pursue the topic any more. "Well, moving on, Felicia would like to have the two of you over for dinner next week. I told her I'd have to see which day is good for you." He saw that Lucius was about to comment and pre-empted him. "I have already explained to her that she needs to be on her best behavior and keep any disapproving comments to herself. I think she is genuinely curious as to why you would be so utterly smitten with Hermione."

Lucius was not sure about having dinner with the Greengrasses, but he knew that it would have to happen at some time. And this was as good a way as any to begin introducing her to his social circle. He hoped a successful dinner would lead to Felicia singing Hermione's praises to the other wives and help her become accepted. "I suppose that Friday is as good a night as any. And please, whatever you do, do not bring up the age difference or treat her like one of your daughters. You'll make it seem so sordid."

"Of course." Connor gave Lucius an appraising look. "I do have to say that being in love does suit you."

A/N: Thank you very much to beaweasley2 who has been a wonderful sounding board for this story. I cannot thank her enough for her input and catching some of the plot inconsistencies you get with a long and involved story. Also, thank you so much to those who have taken time to review. It really means a lot to me that so many are enjoying this. Thank you.