

Murder Most Fowl

by Prof M McGonagall

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Chapter 1

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Chapter 1

Hermione wondered if she ought to have her head examined. She had to be a little insane to even contemplate what she was about to do. There were few things that could cause more fear...the irrational, panicky sort...than living in a nightmare, which was her intention for the next week. But Ron had said in a bracing tone, "Are you a Gryffindor or not?" and Harry and Ginny had promised to offer support whenever needed; so, she had agreed.

Low-level panic left her a little more light-headed than usual after Apparating into a narrow, sunlit lane with Ron, Harry and Ginny. The boys got their bearings fairly quickly and started off down the lane with Hermione and Ginny following behind. On the left, the lane was bordered by wild, low-growing brambles while the right-hand side boasted a high, neatly manicured hedge.

They continued walking until wrought-iron gates appeared to their right. The gates were open today in anticipation of the arrival of guests. For a moment, Hermione stopped to collect herself.

She was a survivor of the War against Voldemort, but even after six years, there were things she still had nightmares about: being chased by Nagini in Harry's old home in Godric's Hollow; flying through the air on an ancient, half-blind dragon; standing alone in a tent in the middle of nowhere crying for Ron; and being tortured in the Malfoys' drawing room.

Granted, sometimes good might come out of having nightmares. Her recurring dream of Ron leaving her was what finally caused her to tell him they should just be friends. In the last couple of months of officially *not* being a couple, one nightmare, at least, had begun to fade. She had looked at her fear squarely and made a good choice for

both herself and Ron, but even this did not convince her that she could face her memories of Malfoy Manor.

Apparently, she had stopped at the gates because Harry and Ron had turned around to look at her, and Ginny had put a supportive arm around her shoulders. Her mind shouted, *No, no, no, NO! If it weren't for the charity...* With a shrug and a deep breath, she put her feet into motion again, and the four of them walked between the gates and into the manor lane.

Mr and Mrs Malfoy were just inside the gates. Hermione wished she'd had time to put on her game face prior to meeting her hosts who stood next to one of several carriages lining the lane. The couple came forward to greet the newcomers. Hermione tried to rummage up the appropriate facial expression at a moment's notice. She was rather afraid she might be grimacing instead of smiling, but it was too late now.

"Mr and Mrs Potter, Mr Weasley, Miss Granger, we are so pleased you agreed to come," Narcissa said in her cultured voice, a smile on her face. Looking at Hermione's face, Narcissa's smile slipped a bit, and she said to Hermione, "I know your memories of our home are not pleasant ones, but we hope you'll manage to enjoy yourself this week. We're positive your being here will help benefit the Widows and Orphans of War Fund."

Lucius offered a nod and a small smile before continuing, "If you'd like, you may ride up to the manor in one of the carriages, or you may just walk on up the lane. It's about a quarter of a mile to the house."

Harry looked at the rest of his friends. "I'd like to walk; how about the rest of you?" His friends nodded their agreement, so Harry said, "I think we'll walk up; thank you, Mr Malfoy."

"Delightful! If you'll wait a moment, a group of us will walk up together," responded Lucius before turning to talk to someone in one of the carriages.

Ron turned toward Hermione and spoke in a low tone for her ears alone, "Oh, that will be delightful, now won't it?"

Hermione gave him a wry smile. "I'm sure." She took a deep breath and readied herself to socialise with the man who had tried to kill her in the Department of Mysteries and had stood by while she was tortured in his drawing room.

Her eyes were drawn to where Lucius Malfoy stood conversing through the open window of one of the carriages. Presently, a tall, dark figure folded himself through the doorway of the carriage. Straightening to his full height, Severus Snape descended the steps of the carriage and crossed over to them.

"Good afternoon, Severus," Hermione said to him. "How is your potion research coming along?"

"Hello, Hermione," he responded. "If you must know, the last batch was completely ruined by the Snodgrass case. If you must have emergency investigations in which only I can help you, could you please wait until a convenient moment in my research?"

"Well, who else could have helped us find out whether Mrs Snodgrass was poisoned or cursed? The symptoms were very subtle and altogether confusing! Until we knew what had happened, I didn't know whether to assign the case to the Aurors or the Magical Hit Squad. And you can't believe how they squabble over these cases."

"Oh, yes, and managing your department is my concern because...?" Severus asked in a withering tone.

"Because," Hermione responded in her most righteous tone, "dealing with wrongdoers is the concern of every good citizen."

"Ah, but developing a potion to cure the psychological trauma of the Cruciatus Curse isn't the concern of every good citizen."

"Well, of course not! Not every good citizen would have the ability to develop such a potion."

"Which brings me back to my original point. I don't mind consulting for your department from time to time. I'll admit, some of your cases have been... intriguing. But settling disputes in your department hardly constitutes an emergency and wouldn't seem to require my services."

"I'm not sure Mrs Snodgrass's family would see it that way, Severus."

"Humph." Severus turned to acknowledge the greetings of Harry, Ginny and Ron.

Hermione was still surprised to see Harry, Ron and Severus managing a polite conversation. Working together had given them a better understanding of each other. She was more pleased to have the last word in a debate with Severus Snape. It didn't happen often. Just knowing Severus was here at Malfoy Manor quelled some of her panic. No one could ever accuse him of being bracing or supportive, but somehow Hermione knew he would be there if she needed someone to protect her.

Hermione and Severus had started to work together fairly often since she had been promoted to head the Department of Investigation, a new department which acted as a liaison between the Aurors and the Magical Hit Squad. The Aurors had traditionally hunted Dark wizards while the Magical Hit Squad had dealt with wizards engaging in criminal activity. With Voldemort dead and his supporters no longer a threat, it was more difficult to decide if occurrences of wrongdoing were the result mainly of Dark magic or criminal activity. Hermione's department assigned a case and followed up on the investigations as needed.

She had incorporated the Muggle practice of bringing in consultants to help investigate when necessary. Sometimes, it was a quick method of determining whether Dark magic or criminal activity was involved. She had asked Severus to consult with the department on several occasions. With his knowledge of both potions and Dark magic, he had been an important component in her success thus far.

She liked to think they had developed a good working relationship. Severus Snape was not an easy man to get to know. Working with him in a capacity beyond teacher and student had given her an even greater appreciation of his sharp mind, his love for research, and his dry wit. As a student, she had never realised Professor Snape even had a sense of humour, but she loved the verbal ripostes in which she and Severus Snape engaged now.

Severus had by now finished exchanging pleasantries with Harry, Ron and Ginny. Lucius Malfoy was striding towards them while carriage doors were being closed by the house-elves in charge of each carriage.

"I'm glad you've decided to walk up," Lucius commented. "I do love showing the grounds to guests, and, of course, you may wander around freely while you are staying here."

Harry, never very subtle, raised his eyebrows at this claim. He had heard discussions over the years of what objects of Dark magic might be hidden at Malfoy Manor.

Lucius drawled, "You mustn't believe everything you hear, Mr Potter. I'd be foolish indeed to invite the Director of the Department of Investigation and two of the Ministry's top Aurors to stay here if I had Dark objects on the premises. The rumours of my stash of evil objects are highly overblown, I assure you."

"That's very reassuring, Lucius," Severus said blandly.

A small smile appeared on Lucius's face as he said, "Point taken, Severus."

The lane they were following curved gracefully through the extensive park. The tall, manicured yew hedge ran along one side of the lane. On the other side, Hermione could see a number of formal gardens and a hedge maze. A fountain was gurgling nearby. The manor house spread out before them, its limestone facade gleaming in the sunlight. The large central portion of the house was flanked by a long wing on either side. Its sheer bulk was imposing, and the feeling of fear Hermione had been trying to suppress began to surface.

Suddenly, a loud squawk sounded from the right. Hermione gave a little squeak, looking around frantically.

"What was that?" Ron asked while Harry slipped his wand into duelling position with a quick flick of his wrist.

Severus leaned towards Hermione and pointed to the top of the yew hedge. A pure white peacock was perched there. It squawked again before spreading its wings and gliding to the ground. Fanning its tail feathers, it bristled angrily. "No need for heroics, Potter. Lucius can handle the peacock."

Lucius Malfoy walked slowly toward the peacock, speaking in a soothing tone. "Shhh, now, Brutus. No one is trying to attack you or take your harem." He continued speaking in his quiet drawl until the peacock lowered its tail feathers. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out some corn and fed it to Brutus.

He said quietly, "This is Brutus. Isn't he a beauty?"

"He's a proud one," Severus responded. With Brutus calm once more, the group resumed their walk to the house.

"Is he the head of the flock?" Ginny asked. "Is a group of peacocks called a flock?"

"Technically, it's referred to as a muster of peafowl or an ostentation," Lucius responded.

"In his case, *ostentation* does seem appropriate," Harry commented, nodding toward the preening peacock.

"Yes, well Brutus does have the largest harem of the muster, so I guess you could call him the cock of the walk." Lucius permitted himself a small smile. "He certainly thinks he is."

"How many peafowl do you have here?" Harry asked.

"I generally keep between 30 and 40 on the estate. Currently, we have 37," Lucius responded.

"How many of them are white?" Hermione asked. "They must be pretty rare."

"All of them are white," Lucius responded. "If you breed two white peafowl, their offspring will usually be white."

"White peafowl set off the cool beauty of the Malfoy colouring," Severus said in his most blasé tone.

"Shut it, Severus," Lucius said from between clenched teeth.

Hermione pursed her lips to hide a smile, but Severus caught her at it and quirked an eyebrow in response to her amusement. Hermione found herself curious about the relationship between Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape. They seemed to be friends, and Hermione wondered how they could have been fighting for such different things in the war and still be on friendly terms.

By this point, they had almost reached the house. Instead of taking the lane as it swept toward the front door, Lucius Malfoy proceeded along the lane leading toward the back of the house. "We are having tea in the rose garden," he said by way of explanation.

Glad she could postpone seeing the entrance hall and the drawing room for a little bit, Hermione suddenly noticed a spring to her step. Ron gave her a smile and a nod, and Hermione realised he was much more sensitive to her as a friend than he had been as a boyfriend. She smiled back.

They reached the back of the house. The rose garden spread out before them in a vast array of loveliness. "Oh, it's beautiful!" Ginny gasped. On a nearby patio, tea for their large party had been set.

As they approached the patio, Severus spoke quietly for Hermione's ears alone, "Lucius couldn't have asked for a better arrangement."

"Oh?" Hermione murmured, hoping he would elaborate.

"The first carriages will be the people who Lucius hopes will donate a lot of money to the Widows and Orphans of War Fund," Severus explained, "and here are the famous Harry Potter, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley to greet them."

"Anything for the cause," Hermione answered, in spite of her lack of enthusiasm for spending the week at Malfoy Manor. "After all, what are founders of a charity for, if not to promote it?"

The first guests began to emerge from the house onto the patio. Lucius hurried forward to give his arm to the first guest, a diminutive elderly witch using a cane. Severus said softly, "Madam Marchbanks doesn't like Lucius, so the fact she is here speaks for her support of the charity... and Narcissa's persuasive abilities."

Lucius carefully pulled out a seat for the tiny lady. She sat regally, her dignity like a cloak around her. Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione and Severus came forward to greet the witch who had been head of the Wizarding Examinations Authority for more years than any of them could remember.

Lucius started the introductions. "Madam Marchbanks, may I present Mr and Mrs Harry...?"

"Poppycock, Lucius!" Madam Marchbanks interrupted. "You're not going to try to introduce me to these young people, are you? Why, I examined all of them during their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s! And I've worked with Severus for years!"

"I beg your pardon, Madam," Lucius said, his most polished smile pasted on his face. "Excuse me while I go see to the other guests." He bowed elegantly before turning and walking away.

"That young man is far too charming," Madam Marchbanks grumbled with a thump of her cane. "I don't trust charming young men."

There didn't seem to be any response which wouldn't be an insult to their host, so everyone remained silent and uneasy. Madam Marchbanks gave a harrumph and peered at them with her sharp, blue eyes. "Mrs Potter, I haven't seen you since your wedding. How is your stint with the Holyhead Harpies?"

"Actually, Madam Marchbanks, I just ended my last season with the Harpies," Ginny responded.

"What! A young athlete in her prime like you? Why on earth would you quit at the peak of your career?"

"It just felt like the right time," Ginny answered with a smile.

"Humph." Madam Marchbanks gave Ginny another of her sharp glances. "You're expecting, I suppose, isn't she, Mr Potter?" Suddenly, Harry was the recipient of her piercing looks.

Harry stammered, "N-nooo, Madam Marchbanks, I do-don't think so."

The piercing look turned into a piercing gleam. "Well, if she isn't expecting now, you must be planning on it soon. And given Molly Weasley's history, I'm guessing it won't be long before the news is public," she concluded, looking pleased with herself.

Once again, the group was rendered silent. Hermione knew Ginny *had* retired from Quidditch so she and Harry could work on starting a family. Their family and closest friends knew this but were bound to secrecy, since Harry and Ginny didn't particularly want their family planning to make front page of *The Daily Prophet*. No one would meet Madam Marchbanks knowing gaze...except Severus, who observed the old lady with a bit of a gleam in his eye.

"Well, Mr Snape?" Madam Marchbanks snapped at him.

"Madam, surely you can't expect me to be acquainted with the details of Potter's intimate life. My distaste for Potter has been well-documented by Rita Skeeter."

"Jackknapes!" was the old lady's response. "As if anybody with any intelligence believes what that harridan writes. Be off with you!"

Severus bowed to the formidable witch, a small lift to the corners of his mouth. Hermione looked at him intently, willing him to take her away from Madam Marchbanks and her quizzing. As he raised his head, he caught Hermione's look and smoothly said, "As you wish, Madam. Miss Granger, might I have a word with you?"

Hermione feigned a look of surprise, "Yes, of course, Severus. Excuse me, Madam Marchbanks." With a small nod to the reverend...and feared...witch, Hermione walked away with Severus. "Thank you," she murmured when they had gone a few steps.

"You owe me," Severus murmured back.

"You always say that," Hermione responded.

"One of these days, I'll call in the debt." Severus glanced at her from the corner of his eye, a small smirk playing across his lips.

Hermione's heart gave a funny, little thump. She decided to change the subject. "Who is the woman coming onto the patio?"

"Who?" Severus had been looking rather intently at her but now glanced toward the doorway from the house at Hermione's nod. "That is Mrs Zabini, Blaise's mother. She's rich as Croesus, but I'm rather surprised Lucius invited her."

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"You don't know? She's known as 'The Black Widow' because she's been married seven times. All of her husbands died under rather mysterious circumstances. She's wealthy enough to maintain her place in society, but most people are a little afraid of her."

"Oh... but I'm sure she's been investigated carefully, hasn't she? If she were guilty of her husbands' deaths, wouldn't she have been found out by now? Perhaps it's coincidence or sheer bad luck?"

"Perhaps you're right... or she's very, very good at what she does."

"Poor Blaise. I assume his father was the last husband, since she goes by Zabini."

"No, Zabini was Husband #2, I think. She kept his name because Blaise is her only child, and she wanted to make it easier for him. I suppose it falls to me to strike up a conversation, seeing as I was head of her son's Hogwarts house. Would you like to meet her?"

Curiosity almost made Hermione agree, but just then she saw someone completely unexpected arrive. "I can't believe...! I would never have thought she'd come. I'm sorry, Severus. You go talk to Mrs Zabini. There is someone I need to speak to." She walked off without waiting for a reply.

Hermione wasn't sure she had seen correctly, but she thought Luna Lovegood was coming towards the patio. A few steps more confirmed her suspicion as Luna stepped through the doorway. "Luna! I'm so surprised to see you here!"

"Hello, Hermione. It's good to see you, too. Why are you surprised to see me? I knew you would be here."

"I would think you'd never want to come back to Malfoy Manor after... what happened to you here."

Luna replied, "Oh, I came with someone." She turned towards a young man walking towards them. He was plain but friendly-looking with brown hair and blue eyes. Smiling, he said, "Luna, did you see the white peacock on the lawn?" Seeing Hermione, he said, "Oh, hello. I'm sorry, did I interrupt?"

"Hermione Granger, I'd like to introduce my fiancé, Rolf Scamander."

"Rolf, I'm very happy to meet you," Hermione said as she shook his hand. In mock indignation, Hermione continued, "But I can't believe you never gave me a hint! How long has this been going on?"

"Remember the expedition when I went to South America? The one I went on to prove the existence of the bifflebug?" Luna asked. Hermione nodded. "Rolf was on the expedition with me. In fact, his grandfather was leading it."

"He was leading an expedition to find the bifflebug?" Hermione asked, confused.

"No, Rolf's grandfather was leading a tour of the Amazon to see the magical plants and animals of the rain forest. Rolf and I started talking, and I told him my dream to prove the existence of the bifflebug. He was interested in my research and decided to help me."

"Did you find any proof of the bifflebug?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Yes," responded Rolf. "Unfortunately, we weren't able to document it, so we'll have to go back again and get our proof."

"We wouldn't have to go back," Luna answered. "Father is satisfied to know his theories are correct, and so am I."

Rolf gave Luna a tender smile. "I know, but your father deserves the recognition of the scientific community and to be proven right." Luna gave him a rapt smile in return.

There was a glow of happiness surrounding Luna. Hermione hugged her. "I'm so happy for you!" Over Luna's shoulder, Hermione noticed some new arrivals. Taking Luna by the shoulders, she turned her towards them. "Luna, look who's here!"

It was Neville and Hannah Longbottom, accompanied by Mrs Augusta Longbottom, Neville's grandmother.

"Neville! Hannah!" Hermione exchanged hugs with each one. "I'm so glad to see you! Hello, Mrs Longbottom," she greeted the old lady, shaking her hand.

"Good afternoon, Miss Granger," said Mrs Longbottom.

"Grandmother," Neville said, "I see Madam Marchbanks sitting right over there."

"Griselda is here?" Mrs Longbottom sounded truly shocked and didn't bother to moderate the volume of her voice. "Why, she hates Lucius Malfoy! She told me there was no way she would be coming the last time we spoke. I'm going to find out what changed her mind." Mrs Longbottom went off as rapidly as she could with her cane, anxious to find out what could have persuaded her friend.

It wasn't long before Harry, Ginny and Ron joined their little group to find Neville telling Hermione and Luna about a funny accident in one of the Hogwarts greenhouses the previous spring...with running commentary by Hannah.

"And then the Mandrake started shrieking. It hadn't been repotted correctly," Neville recounted.

Hannah interjected, "Neville was almost deaf for two months. I had to write everything out or sign anything I wanted to tell him. You wouldn't believe how quiet it was in our

house! I think that's one of the main reasons I took the job at the Leaky Cauldron. I wanted to hear people talk."

Ron said, "Good one, Neville! There's one way to keep a girl quiet."

Hannah looked at Ron in shocked annoyance. Hermione just shook her head. Harry stifled a laugh, but he couldn't fool Ginny who punched him in the shoulder. Neville looked at Hermione with mock puzzlement as he said, "I can't understand why you ever broke up with this smooth talker, Hermione."

"It's hard to figure, I know," Hermione answered, shaking her head.

The friends started to chuckle, and Ron asked, "What? What's so funny?"

"Come on, let's sit down for tea," Harry said. They sat down at two nearby tables on the patio, chattering happily as they caught up on the different events in their lives. Hermione, who had not had much sleep during the week before, found her mind wandering. She glanced across the patio and noticed Severus still sitting with Mrs Zabini. Mrs Zabini leaned toward Severus, displaying her quite ample charms, and laid her hand upon his arm. Hermione couldn't hear what she was saying, but it was clearly an intimate moment between the two.

Suddenly, Hermione felt exhausted. It wasn't totally unexpected, she thought dully. After all, she hadn't slept well for several nights, worrying over her stay at Malfoy Manor. She spied Mrs Malfoy standing at the far edge of the patio with two women and headed over towards them to ask Mrs Malfoy if she could be shown to her room. As she moved closer, she thought the younger woman looked like Daphne Greengrass, but Hermione wasn't sure as she hadn't seen her since leaving Hogwarts. The older woman must be her mother. Narcissa was pointing out the various types of roses growing in the garden.

"Excuse me, Mrs Malfoy," Hermione began. "Please pardon the interruption."

Narcissa turned toward her. "Oh, dear, you look as though you don't feel well. What can I do for you, Miss Granger?"

"I have a headache and was wondering if you could show me to my room."

"Of course. We have assigned each person a house-elf to help them navigate around the house. When you go into the house, just call for Nolly. She will show you to your room. If you need a headache potion or something else, Nolly will get it. Will you be all right? I'd show you to your room myself, but I'm trying to get everyone settled here."

"That's quite all right, Mrs Malfoy. I'm sure your house-elf will be very helpful."

"Dinner is at eight in the dining room. I hope you will be feeling better by then," Narcissa responded.

"I hope so as well. Thank you."

Hermione started walking back toward the house. She saw Lucius Malfoy talking to a man whom she recognised as Newt Scamander. Newt Scamander was talking in animated tones. "It's not right to keep such beautiful birds captive on your estate, Mr Malfoy! They deserve freedom!"

"It's a large estate, Mr Scamander," Malfoy replied. "They wander almost entirely freely over hundreds of acres."

"A large prison is still a prison, sir! Why, it makes my blood boil to see you casually disregarding something I've worked against my entire career!" Newt Scamander was working himself into quite an angry state.

"Tomorrow, I shall introduce you to my gamekeeper who is quite an expert on peafowl. I'm sure if you discuss our methods with him..." Mr Malfoy's voice faded as Hermione moved out of range of his discussion with Rolf's grandfather.

She stepped inside the house into a very large room. She realised the patio must be the terrace off the manor's ballroom. She imagined a room full of dancing couples. In her mind's eye, she saw one of the couples leaving the dance floor to exit onto the terrace for a romantic rendezvous. She realised the couple bore a strong resemblance to Severus Snape and Mrs Zabini. Suddenly, she became aware how very much her head ached.

"Nolly!" she called.

A house-elf wearing a neatly laundered pillowcase embroidered with the Malfoy crest appeared at once. "Miss Hermione Granger is needing something? How is Nolly to be helping Miss Hermione Granger?" she asked politely.

"Could you please show me to my room? I have a bad headache."

"Yes, miss."

Walking out of the ballroom, they crossed to the grand dual staircase, which ascended from both sides of the entrance hall. Just as they were beginning to climb the stairs, the front door was flung open. Hermione turned to see Draco Malfoy holding tightly on to the door handle as though he'd topple to the floor otherwise. "Draco? Are you all right?" Hermione asked, walking towards him. "Oh, you're bleeding!"

Draco had a large gash on his forehead. Hermione hurried over to him, taking out her wand as she went. "*Tergeo!*" she said, holding her wand up to his forehead to siphon the blood away from the wound. "Nolly, would you please bring me some dittany and bandages and let Mrs Malfoy know Draco is here in the entrance hall?"

"Yes, miss," Nolly responded. With a snap of her fingers, Nolly left.

"Let me help you to a seat," Hermione said to Draco. She led him to a small sofa along one wall in the foyer and helped him ease down onto it.

Nolly appeared with a small pop, carrying a little bottle. "Nolly is bringing the dittany and bandages, Miss Granger."

At that moment, Narcissa came hurrying into the entrance hall. "Draco!" she said, running to him. "What happened?"

"I was coming home from Grandmother's..."

"Hold still, Draco. I'm applying the dittany," Hermione said. She carefully let drops of dittany fall on the gash, which began to knit back together. She bandaged the cut and handed the supplies back to Nolly. "Thank you, Nolly." To Draco she said, "Sorry for the interruption."

Draco fingered the bandage gingerly. "That's quite all right. Thank you for your help."

Narcissa was beginning to get impatient. "Draco, what happened to you?"

"It was the strangest thing. I was riding Nightshade back from Grandmother's. I was trotting back to the stables in a bit of a hurry because I knew tea had started. Out of nowhere, Brutus came flying right out in front of us. Nightshade reared up and threw me."

"Brutus came flying at you? He doesn't like horses!"

"I know, Mother. It surprised me as much as Nightshade. Ordinarily, he wouldn't be able to unsaddle me."

Narcissa gently brushed his hair back with her hand. "Why don't you get some rest? You'll want to be able to attend dinner. I'll send Astoria up. She's training to be a

Healer and will be able to tell you if you have a concussion."

Narcissa turned to Hermione. "Thank you, Miss Granger, for your quick response. I'm sorry we've kept you from your rest. Let me ask Nolly to show you to your room."

"Thank you, Mrs Malfoy."

"Nolly!" The little house-elf appeared. "Please show Miss Granger to her room."

Nolly led Hermione up the right-hand staircase. Hermione's bedroom for the week was to the right at the top of the stairs. When she entered her room, she had an impression of warm peach tones, but all she really noticed was the bed. Exhaustion finally catching up to her, she took off her shoes and climbed into bed. With a sigh of relief, she said, "Thank you, Nolly."

"May Nolly get Miss something to help with the sore head?" asked the house-elf.

"Could you just pull the curtains, please? Oh, could you please wake me at 7:00 so I have time to get ready for dinner?" At the elf's nod, Hermione relaxed into the pillow. "Thank you." Once the little elf had darkened the room and left her, Hermione was soon fast asleep.

She awoke when the little elf shook her, feeling much better. The invitation for the house party had said guests would dress for dinner each night. She decided to wear her most comfortable dress robes in navy blue, robes she often wore for business functions. She put her hair up in a low bun, applied simple make-up and chose a chunky gold necklace and matching earrings. She decided she looked presentable, if a bit professional for a house party. However, comfort was her big consideration, so she decided not to worry about it tonight.

Hermione had plenty of time before dinner, so she decided to explore the house a bit. She walked down the grand staircase and noticed the room to her left at the bottom of the stairs was the dining room. She looked to her right and recognised the door of the drawing room. This was the room that had haunted her nightmares, and for a moment, Hermione wanted to dart back upstairs to the relative safety of her bedroom. She decided, however, that now was the time to face this room. She was well-rested, which gave her a little more courage than she had possessed over the last week or so. She thought being alone might be a positive; there would be no one to see her if she succumbed to un-Gryffindor panic.

Hermione walked up to the doorway, took a deep breath, and walked in. Then she walked out again. This wasn't the drawing room. She walked back to the front door where she had entered as a prisoner years before. She looked at the doorway; yes, this was where the drawing room should be. She walked into the room again. In her nightmares, she always saw the dark purple walls; the Malfoy family portraits; the carpet in purple, gold and green; the chandelier; the marble fireplace and gilded, scrolled mirror above it.

This room looked nothing like that one, except... yes, there was the marble fireplace with the same gilded mirror hanging above it. The drawing room had been redecorated. The walls were a pale gold while the ornate woodwork and plaster were white. The portraits had been replaced with beautiful landscapes. Instead of the large, dark carpet, smaller area rugs were scattered amongst the various seating areas to match the furniture, which was in shades of blue and gold. No large chandelier hung overhead. Instead, lamps adorned the walls and appeared on various tables throughout the room.

In a daze, she crossed to a sofa and sat down. How strange it was to confront her nightmare and find it so changed from what she remembered! So far, the Malfoys had been quite pleasant. Maybe she could lay the memories of her war time experiences here to rest.

She decided to continue her exploration of the house. Opening another door, Hermione entered what was apparently the music room, as it contained a piano and a harp. Crossing the room, she opened another door to what must be a sitting room. The next door led into yet another room. Judging by its feminine appearance, Hermione supposed this must be a morning room. With its cosy arrangement of furniture and a desk in a prominent part of the room, Hermione guessed this must be where Mrs Malfoy spent a good portion of her day.

Moving on through the room, she passed through another door into a conservatory ... a greenhouse right here in the Manor. She would have to make sure Neville saw this place. With its two-story high ceilings, it held all sorts of flowers, plants, bushes, and even trees.

Hermione was quietly making her way through the lovely surroundings when she was surprised to overhear voices. A woman was speaking: "This week is your chance, Pansy. Show Draco what a lovely woman you've become, lure him to your bed, and soon you'll be Mrs Draco Malfoy."

"Do you think it would work, Mother?" another voice asked.

"I'll help you. Together, we usually get what we want, don't we?"

Hopeful that she could leave without Pansy Parkinson and her mother noticing her, Hermione carefully eased away. Noticing another door close by, she opened it to find a large entryway at the back of the house. She continued down a corridor which passed the rooms she had already seen and soon found herself back at the ballroom and the entrance hall.

Hermione continued on down the corridor and heard conversation coming from a room further on past the dining room. She followed the voices until she came to the billiard room where she saw Ron and Harry playing a game of pool. They stopped playing when they noticed her.

"Hermione! Are you feeling better?" asked Ron.

"I'm fine. I was just so tired after not sleeping well all last week. I'm feeling much better after my nap. Where's Ginny?"

"She's taking some time for herself before getting ready for dinner," Harry replied.

Ron took his shot. While Hermione watched, she told them about how the drawing room had changed and what she had found in the other wing of the house.

Ginny joined them shortly, and dinner was announced soon after. Name cards at each seat showed where everyone was to sit. Hermione found herself down towards Mrs Malfoy's end of the table seated between Severus and Oakmont Greengrass, who turned out to be Daphne's father.

Conversation was pleasant, despite the different personalities at the table. As dinner drew to a close, Lucius rose to speak to the guests. "We are delighted to have you visit our home this week. We have joined together for the purpose of supporting the Widows and Orphans of War Fund. If you will pardon me, however, I'd like to take this opportunity to speak to you on a more personal matter. Narcissa and I are very pleased to announce the engagement of our son, Draco, to Daphne Greengrass. Daphne, we welcome you to our family. Would you please raise your glasses in a toast to Draco and Daphne?"

Almost all the guests responded, "To Draco and Daphne."

Hermione turned toward Severus to make a comment when she noticed Pansy, who was sitting on the other side of Severus, had not raised her glass. Leaning around Severus a bit, Hermione asked, "Pansy, are you all right?"

Pansy turned toward her with a glare. "Of course, I'm all right. What could possibly be wrong?" She turned toward Draco and Daphne. "I hope the two of you will be very happy. Please excuse me." Pansy exited the dining room quickly, followed shortly after by her mother.

There was silence for a moment after their abrupt departure, but Narcissa said, "Why don't we all go to the drawing room? We can talk to each other better there."

She rose from her seat to lead the way. Just then, a man came rushing into the dining room shouting, "Mr Malfoy!" He was a tall man with brown hair and a big moustache. He wore a tweed suit with brown boots. He was twisting his flat cap in his hand.

"Brax! What are you doing here? You're interrupting." Lucius Malfoy did not sound happy.

Brax's tone sounded almost surly. "I beg your pardon, sir, but Portia is dead!"

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 3

When the Malfoys host a week-long house party at Malfoy Manor, they are hoping to regain their standing in society and celebrate a happy family event. Instead, a series of unfortunate incidents threatens disaster. Narcissa turns to Hermione and Severus for help.

□

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Chapter 2

Lucius said in a choked voice, "Excuse me, please," before he and Brax left the room. There was a moment of stunned silence before the guests started murmuring amongst themselves, wondering what was happening and who Portia might be.

Narcissa explained, "That was Mr Braxson, our gamekeeper. Poor Lucius, Portia was one of his favourite peahens." The rest of them followed Narcissa into the drawing room where they took the opportunity to congratulate Draco and Daphne as well as their parents. Severus didn't know Oakmont and Philomena Greengrass well, but they certainly seemed happy about their daughter's engagement.

At one point, Severus and Hermione were standing together at one side of the room. Hermione said, "You're pretty good friends with Lucius Malfoy, aren't you?"

"I would say so. Why do you ask?"

"I'm guessing Portia was part of Brutus's harem?"

"She would be quite misnamed if she wasn't," Severus responded.

"Ever since hearing about poor Portia, I was wondering if Mr Malfoy has named all his birds after Shakespearean characters."

"Let's hope not. If there is a Caesar or an Antony, we could have a murder on our hands. 'Et tu, Brute?'" Severus said, causing Hermione to smile.

"I'm glad Brutus and Portia weren't named Romeo and Juliet, or Romeo would be trying to figure out how to kill himself now. 'Eyes look your last. Wings, take your last embrace'." Hermione countered.

Severus raised one eyebrow at her deliberate misquote and responded, "If their names were Othello and Desdemona, we'd have to look for evidence of foul play."

"Oh, Severus," said Hermione, shaking her head and smiling, "that's too much. Fowl play." Severus's raised the corners of his mouth ever so slightly in response.

When Lucius came to the drawing room after discussing the situation with Brax, Severus could tell that his friend was upset, in spite of his attempts to appear happy as he received congratulations on his son's engagement. Severus knew that Lucius viewed the peafowl on his estate as pets and hoped that nothing was wrong with the rest of the muster.

When the evening festivities were concluded, Severus retired to his usual bedroom at Malfoy Manor. After the war, Severus found that Lucius and Narcissa had decided that one of the bedrooms in the family wing would be his when he stayed there. Narcissa knew he liked the darker, masculine colours of the room.

Severus awoke early the next morning as was his custom. After attending to his basic ablutions, he decided to go for a morning swim. He walked through the house to the back hall and thence out to the pool.

The pool was in one of the walled gardens and was charmed to be warm enough to use year-round. It was a long, narrow swimming pool, well-designed for swimming laps. Severus enjoyed having the time to himself to get some exercise and think. He found himself recalling his talk with Phaedra Zabini the day before:

"It's no wonder Blaise always spoke so highly of you, Severus. You're quite an impressive man," Mrs Zabini purred.

"I doubt that Blaise said I was an impressive man, Mrs Zabini," Snape scoffed.

"How many times do I have to ask you to call me Phaedra?" Mrs Zabini leaned in toward Severus, displaying her ample charms as she placed her hand on his arm. "Besides, what does it matter what Blaise thinks? I think you're an impressive man."

Severus removed his arm from Mrs Zabini's grasp to pick an imaginary bit of lint from his robes. "Do you?"

"I've just said so, haven't I?" Mrs Zabini even pouted prettily.

"I suppose you have." Severus wanted very much to know what she was playing at. He leaned back in his chair with an air of relief. "Well, thank you very much, Mrs Zabini. I admit that, like most men, I have a curiosity to know what an attractive woman might think of me. It's good to know that your opinion is positive."

"Oh, it is, Severus." He noted that the purr was back in Mrs Zabini's voice.

Severus rose from his seat. If there was one thing he excelled at, it was the polite brush-off. "It has been a pleasure talking to you today, and I shall look back on this

conversation the next time I need a boost of confidence to ask someone for a date." With a polite nod of his head, he took his leave. He went looking for Hermione but found that she was feeling unwell and had gone to her room.

Severus's body cut through the water as he swam. He wondered why Phaedra Zabini had been so flirtatious; he could only think of two reasons. Either she was looking for Husband Number Eight and was considering him as a candidate for the part, or she wanted something from him. He thought the latter suggestion more likely and wondered what it was she would eventually ask from him.

His muscles were pleasantly tired, and the sun was warming the seating area near the pool when he decided to finish his swim. Running his towel over his hair and down his body, he noted that his new exercise regimen was beginning to pay off. After the stress of the war was over, his appetite had returned to that of his pre-war days; unfortunately, his body was no longer that of a teenager, and he'd had to take measures to prevent too much weight gain. He sat in one of the lounges near the pool, allowing the sun to finish the job of drying his body. He closed his eyes and relaxed as he thought about the day before. What a very odd mixture of people for a week-long house party! Only a hostess of Narcissa's skills and eager desire to raise the Malfoy social standing would be able to pull it off.

Because of his close relationship with the Malfoy family, Severus had been privy to most of the guest list and some of the planning. The engagement had come as something of a surprise, although he knew that Lucius and Narcissa were trying to arrange a marriage for Draco...something about running out of time to inherit the Black fortune, as though the Malfoy fortune wouldn't be enough for any reasonable person. He wasn't sure yet what he thought about Draco and Daphne marrying; something about it nagged at him, but he hadn't had the time to sort through his thoughts on that subject yet. Perhaps it was a general distaste for the idea of someone arranging something that important for someone else...it smacked a bit of Dumbledore. Of course, his parents had chosen their own partners in marriage, which hadn't worked out well at all.

Severus shifted irritably in his lounge. This train of thought was no way to relax. Focusing on the warmth of the sun on his body, he let his thoughts wander. He smiled slightly as the image of Hermione formed in his mind. Her thought processes had become quite astute over the years, not much like the hand-waving know-it-all she had been, parroting everything she read. As much as he liked to tease her about not managing her personnel, he had to admit that she had done a good job with the Department of Investigation.

Who would have thought that Kingsley could put someone in authority over both the Heads of the Aurors and the Magical Hit Squad and have them accept it as well as they had? It was a huge promotion for Hermione. The scuttlebutt at the Ministry was that Minister Shacklebolt was grooming Hermione to someday be the Director of the entire Department of Magical Law Enforcement, a job that was second in importance only to the Minister of Magic himself. Hermione applied herself diligently and did a lot of research, especially into different avenues and methods of law enforcement. She had brought some Muggle investigative techniques into the two departments during her tenure with positive results. Her record of success spoke for itself.

Furthermore, he found her a collaborative colleague when he consulted with her, willing to share ideas and give credit where it was due ... Wait a minute. His train of thought stalled as he realised he liked to *tease* her about not managing her personnel. He could count on the fingers of one hand the people he had enjoyed teasing over the years, and most of them were dead. It still rather surprised him that he found Hermione's presence tolerable.

Severus decided he was dry enough to return to the house. He put on his robe and started walking back to the house. He felt uncomfortable seeing people before he was wearing his more usual garments. Instead of returning to the house by the back entrance, he walked through the gardens to what was referred to at the Manor as the "Stable Entrance." The back stairs were just inside that door; ascending this staircase would take him directly up to the family wing.

He met Lucius coming up from the direction of the stables and the aviary. Severus asked, "Have you been down to check on the birds this morning?"

"Yes, I wanted to see if there was an obvious cause of Portia's death. I couldn't see anything unusual. There wasn't a mark on her. Brax and I are wondering if there is an illness amongst the muster. He and I will walk the estate after breakfast and try to examine the rest of the peafowl." Lucius slapped a pair of gloves he was holding in one hand against the palm of the other. "Narcissa won't be happy that I'm abandoning our house guests, but what else can I do?"

"Why don't you offer to form a walking party to see the estate? You can be looking for peafowl while entertaining those guests who want to see more of the estate."

Lucius clapped Severus on the shoulder. "That's an excellent idea! Narcissa will be pleased. Thank you, Severus."

After showering and dressing, Severus made his way to the dining room. A variety of breakfast foods was set up on a buffet along one wall.

Lucius sat at one end of the table. Sitting next to him were Rita Skeeter and a man Severus did not know. The man was rather smarmy in appearance, with dark hair and moustache. The leer he was aiming at Rita Skeeter made Severus feel distinctly uncomfortable. Hermione sat on the opposite side of the table, slightly separate from the others.

Severus went to the buffet to get himself some breakfast and then sat next to Hermione. Lucius said, "Mr Podgis Pimpleton, this is Mr Severus Snape. Severus, Podgis is the Minister of Financial Oversight. Podgis, Severus is a Potions expert and occasionally consults with the Department of Investigation."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr Pimpleton," Severus said, extending his hand.

Mr Pimpleton shook his hand and said, "Likewise. Please call me Podgis."

Hermione spoke up. "Podgis, I didn't expect to see you here this week. I thought Percy Weasley was going to be attending this event for the Ministry."

"Podgy wasn't planning to come at first," Rita said, giving Podgis a saccharin smile, "but then I told him that I'd like to go."

"I can't refuse my Rita-Wita." She laid her hand with its large, diamond engagement ring on his arm. He patted it and gave her a playful growl.

Severus was close enough to notice a small shudder pass through Hermione. He supposed she was as disgusted with this display as he was.

Rita turned to Lucius. "I was thrilled to be here at dinner when you made your big announcement, Lucius. Would you mind if I ask you a few questions about the engagement?"

Lucius answered, "You may ask your questions, of course, Ms Skeeter, but I don't promise to answer." He finished the comment with his most charming smile.

"Of course, Mr Malfoy, but then I would just have to infer your responses, wouldn't I?" Rita Skeeter gave him a self-satisfied smile in return.

"Mr Malfoy," Hermione interrupted, "did you mention that you were planning on having beetle repellent sprayed around the grounds?" Till that point, Severus had not seen Hermione lift her eyes from her plate, but now she looked directly at Rita Skeeter. Hermione continued, "You probably should warn the guests in case anyone is allergic to it."

Lucius looked confused, but Ms Skeeter gave Hermione an angry glare. When she turned back toward Lucius, she was far less aggressive than Severus had expected. After a moment of thought, Severus recalled something about Ms Skeeter causing trouble during the Tri-Wizard Tournament the year the Dark Lord returned. Hadn't she been some type of insect spying on Potter? Her Animagus form must be that of a beetle of some type.

"How long have your son and Miss Greengrass known each other?" Rita Skeeter asked.

Lucius responded, "They were in the same class at Hogwarts."

"Did they fall in love at school?"

"Not to my knowledge."

Rita asked, "Your son has been out of the country for quite some time. How did he and Miss Greengrass fall in love?"

Lucius responded, "Draco isn't the type of person to pour out his feelings to his parents. I'm not sure I could give you the intimate details that would please your readers."

"Is it true that you and Ms Greengrass's parents have arranged their marriage?"

Lucius looked at Ms Skeeter with a puzzled expression. "It is true that Mrs Malfoy and I had an arranged marriage, as did Mr and Mrs Greengrass. I can't speak for Mr and Mrs Greengrass, but marriage has certainly worked out well for Mrs Malfoy and me."

"I was referring to Draco's and Daphne's engagement."

"Draco proposed, and Daphne accepted. I'm not sure what else you wish to know."

"Is it true that this engagement is necessary for Draco to inherit his fortune?"

Lucius gave the perfect snort of humour as he shook his head. "The Malfoy fortune doesn't have those strange rules that many of the pureblood families have attached to their fortunes."

Severus had to admit that Lucius was very good. While seeming to answer all her questions, he really gave Rita very little information. Rita stared at him intently for a moment. She seemed to realise that he wasn't going to reveal any exclusive details.

After breakfast, Lucius gathered the guests together to organise the walk around the estate. Severus noted that Lucius introduced Newt to Brax, his gamekeeper. Newt, Rolf and Luna agreed to accompany Brax around the estate so Newt could quiz the gamekeeper on his methods of raising peafowl.

Most of the party who wanted to go on the estate tour chose to accompany their host. Draco wanted to show Daphne the estate, and her siblings, Ashton and Astoria, opted to go along. Pansy and her brother, Pierce Parkinson, wanted to catch up with their former classmates and were going as well. Hermione and Ron declared their interest in seeing the estate. Severus decided he would go to be a supportive friend in case Lucius found something disturbing about the peafowl. Phaedra Zabini gave him an intense look as though she was thinking about joining him on the walk, but he studiously ignored her and was grateful when she decided to stay behind.

Braxson had checked the areas of the estate closest to the house earlier that morning. There were charms protecting the gardens from the peafowl, as they would eat flowers, if allowed. This left the wooded areas of the estate to check. Lucius explained that peafowl preferred roosting in trees, so a series of pathways had been made through the woods on his estate for the purpose of checking on the peafowl and generally enjoying the natural beauties of his property.

For the most part, it was a merry group that set out on its hike across the Malfoy grounds. Draco would point out the landmarks of the estate to Daphne and Astoria, who appeared to be quite interested as to where her sister would be living after marrying Draco. It turned out Pierce Parkinson and Ashton Greengrass had been good friends when they were students at Hogwarts. They chatted about old times with Pansy joining in.

Severus was walking next to Lucius at the front of the group but found himself acutely conscious of the fact that Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley were walking directly behind them. Lucius wasn't very talkative, allowing Draco to play tour guide. Severus found himself slowing a bit to hear what Draco had to say about the various areas of the estate. Soon he was walking next to Hermione.

"I want to come back later and explore the hedge maze," she was saying to Ron. "Look, there's a tree rising above the centre of the maze. Maybe we can organise a maze race with some prize for whoever reaches the centre first. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"It might, but I'm not sure you'd get Harry to join in after his last maze race."

"You're probably right." Hermione shook her head, thinking about the sad death of Cedric Diggory. "Still, assuming it's not charmed with life-threatening traps, I think it would be a great idea. Maybe we can find a way to use it to raise money for the Fund," Hermione mused.

"Are you suggesting we lay bets on the winner of the race?" Severus asked.

"Or everyone who wants to race pays a bit to be a part of it with the money to go to the charity."

"You're a born fundraiser, Miss Granger," said Lucius over his shoulder. "Perhaps we can sit down and brainstorm some ideas later."

"If you'd like, I'd be happy to," Hermione responded, smiling.

A little further on in their walk, they saw a large house not large by Malfoy Manor standards, but large enough for any reasonable person. "Whose house is that?" Ron asked.

"That is the Dower House," Draco answered. "My grandmother lives there."

"By herself?" Ron asked in an incredulous tone, unable to believe that any family member could get a house that size to themselves.

"With her house-elves, yes, Weasley," said Draco in a somewhat haughty tone.

"Is this where you were riding from when you had your accident yesterday?" Hermione asked in an effort to change the subject.

"Yes, we try to visit with her every day," Draco answered.

"That's wonderful," Hermione said. "My grandfather used to live in our house with us before he died, and I loved being able to spend so much time with him."

"Grandmother used to live in the manor with us, too, until..." Draco stopped suddenly as if he had been about to say something he shouldn't.

"Until?" Daphne asked, unaware of the awkward moment.

"I moved my mother to the Dower House when the Dark Lord decided Malfoy Manor would be his headquarters," Lucius commented in a quiet tone. "I let him think she was dead in order to protect her."

"Oh, that's sweet," Daphne responded.

Severus bit back the comment he wanted to make. Daphne was a simpleton if she thought that moving an elderly woman from her family and the only home she had known since her marriage into a house where she had to live by herself with very little contact from her family was sweet. It had been extremely difficult for Lucius, given how close the Malfoy family was. Daphne's asinine comment was none of his business, though, so he kept his comment to himself.

"It's what had to be done to protect the family. Besides, Mother is rather reclusive by nature," was all Lucius said. He was quiet for a long while after that, having apparently revealed all the personal information he was willing to share for the moment.

Severus didn't mind the quiet. This part of the walk was beautiful. Even Pansy, Ashton and Pierce had stopped their chattering. The path wandered next to a small stream with wildflowers growing along its banks. A bridge crossed over the stream at a point where it bubbled over rocks strewn in the stream bed. The trees surrounded them.

Occasionally, they would see a peacock or peahen picking at the ground a little distance from the path. Lucius took careful note of the birds, trying to see if anything appeared amiss.

The path widened into an open space where the ruins of an old house remained. Astoria asked, "What is this place?"

Draco replied, "This is the original Norman manor house the Malfoys built when the family first came to England with William the Conqueror. About 400 years ago, my ancestor purchased the land next to his and decided to build the present day manor house there. Then, when ruins became popular in the late 18th and 19th centuries, the benches were added in order to enable parties of picnickers."

Pansy spoke up, "Draco, Daphne and I would love to spend some time catching up on things. Would you mind if we just sat here a while? Ashton and Pierce will stay with us if you're worried that we might need someone to look after us."

Daphne looked up to Draco appealingly. "Would you mind, Draco?"

"Not at all, Daphne," Draco replied. "Have fun. Just remember we're having lunch with Grandmother today. All right?"

"I remember." Giving a little wave in Draco's direction, Daphne and Pansy walked off toward the ruins, followed by their brothers.

The smaller group, now numbering only six, looked at each other as if to decide how to reorganise themselves for the remainder of the walk. Astoria said, "There's such a sense of history here. I wonder what it was like to live here when this was the manor house."

"There are some interesting stories from that time period," Lucius said. "If you're really interested in hearing them..."

"Oh, yes, please," Astoria replied.

"Well, then..." Lucius began, clearly anticipating sharing Malfoy family history. He and Astoria walked on ahead.

Draco, remembering his duties as host, turned to Ron and said, "Weasley, is your sister still playing with the Harpies? I feel out-of-date on my Quidditch knowledge, having been out of the country for so long." This was exactly the right discussion opening for Ron, and soon the two young men had struck up a spirited discussion.

Hermione gave Severus a smile, but then her expression became more serious. "I have to admit I've wondered why you were friends with Lucius Malfoy. He has always seemed so evil to me, but now I'm realising that the war wasn't particularly easy for him either."

Severus took the time to think about how to respond to this. "My friendship with the Malfoys was mostly feigned for a long time, as was theirs with me. Things changed for Lucius once the Dark Lord made Malfoy Manor his headquarters."

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"Malfoys are very protective of their family," Severus continued. "The Dark Lord put the Malfoy family in danger, despite the many years of loyalty Lucius had shown. When it was a choice between the Dark Lord and his family, there was no choice for Lucius. He did what he had to do to keep his family as safe as he could. His attitude about the Dark Lord underwent the same change mine did after the death of Lily Potter. That's what changed our relationship into a real friendship."

"Lucius Malfoy did such terrible things, though."

"Yes, we all did things we would rather not have done due to Voldemort," Severus agreed. He understood that Hermione's experiences with Lucius had been terrible. He wasn't going to try to change her mind about her opinion of the Malfoy family, but he could give her a different perspective of them.

Hermione looked very thoughtful. That was one thing Severus admired about her. She really tried to think things through carefully, not like...

"Brutus!" Lucius's anguished cry rang out as he ran off to the right of the path into the woods. The white, still body of a peacock was visible near one of the trees.

"It really is 'Et tu, Brute,' isn't it?" Severus asked quietly enough that only Hermione could hear him. He sighed; this was going to be a real blow to Lucius.

He and Hermione soon reached the spot where Draco, Ron and Astoria were standing, all of them looking at the scene of Lucius kneeling over the body of his favourite peacock.

"It's a lot of fuss to be making over a bird," Ron said in a puzzled tone of voice.

"You have to understand, Weasley," Draco answered quietly. "When the Dark Lord lived with us, caring for these birds was the only thing that gave Father any peace. They're his pets. He watches over them almost as carefully as he did me."

Draco walked over to his father, followed by the others. "Father," he said, putting his hand on Lucius's shoulder, "is there anything we can do to help?"

Lucius reached up to grasp Draco's hand but didn't say anything, continuing to stare at the body of Brutus the peacock.

Severus realised that Lucius was overwhelmed and didn't really know what to do, so he asked, "Is there a clue to what happened? Any sign of a struggle, for instance?"

There were no feathers on the ground, no sign of an attacker, no blood. Hermione suggested, "Let's levitate the body back to the aviary. It can be examined more closely there."

Lucius took a deep breath. "Yes, you're right, of course."

Lucius took out his wand, but his hand was trembling. Severus laid his hand on Lucius's arm. "Allow me," he said. Severus took out his wand and uttered, "*Mobilicorpus!*"

"Thank you, Severus," Lucius said.

The group walked back towards the house, the body of the peacock floating before them. Conversation was subdued out of respect for their host's grief. They crossed the front lawn until they came to the long lane that led to the stables and aviary.

Lucius sighed. "It's hard to believe that Brutus was here yesterday, ready to protect his territory, and today he and Portia are dead."

"Brutus attacked you here yesterday?" Draco asked in surprise.

"Oh, he didn't really attack. Just a challenge really - squawk, fan his tail, strut, that sort of thing."

"I was surprised because this is about where he attacked Nightshade and me last evening."

"This must have been 'his spot' yesterday. Peacocks can be pretty territorial, you know," commented Lucius.

"True," Draco responded.

They reached the aviary and laid Brutus on a table the gamekeeper used for examining the peafowl when necessary. It wasn't long before Braxson and his walking group

returned.

Braxson led Newt, Rolf and Luna into the aviary saying, "Now, Mr Scamander, if you will step this way, I'll show you my headquarters, so to speak. My office is where we keep all the data on the..." His voice cut off as he saw the group of people standing in the main room of the aviary. "What's happened here, Mr Malfoy?" He took a step or two toward the group surrounding the table. "Oh, no! Not Brutus!"

Ron showed the skills that made him a rather good Auror. "You know which bird this is from over there even with people standing between you and the body?"

"Of course I know the birds, sir," Braxson answered in an impatient tone. "That's my job. That's got to be Brutus. Look at the size of his tail feathers. The older the cock, the longer the tail feathers. Brutus is the oldest peacock on the estate. Now, sir, if you please, let me examine him."

Everyone moved aside, leaving Lucius and Braxson to examine the body of Brutus. The two of them studied every inch of the body. "There's not a mark on him, Mr Malfoy, just like Portia," said the gamekeeper.

"I know, Brax. What do you think?" Lucius asked.

"Must be an illness of some sort, sir. That'd be hard to know without bringing all the birds in. What do you reckon, sir?"

"I agree. I'll summon them in. They won't be happy about it, so we'll need to have some of your special bran mash prepared. Not too much of your special ingredient, mind you, just enough to keep them calm."

"Aye, sir. Do you want to keep this body like the other one?"

"Yes, we may have to autopsy them later for more information," Lucius responded. Braxson tenderly lifted the body of Brutus off the table and carried it into another room. Lucius followed after, presumably to apply a stasis spell to keep the body in its present condition.

When they returned, Braxson grabbed a large mashing tool from a drawer in the table. Lucius offered, "Here, let me help you." Lucius grabbed a huge mixing bowl while Brax grabbed a bag of bran meal and sliced it open with a pocket knife pulled from the pocket of his trousers.

"Father, Daphne and I are scheduled to have lunch with Grandmother. I need to go back to the house and get ready. Will you be all right?" Draco asked.

"Yes, Brax and I will be quite busy for a while, so you all might as well go back up to the house and enjoy yourselves."

Draco left with Astoria, followed by Ron chatting with Luna and Rolf and his grandfather walking along behind. Severus noticed that Hermione was studying the making of the bran mash closely. Something about the process must have sparked her curiosity, not that there was anything unusual about that, Severus thought.

"Do you need some help, Lucius?" Severus asked.

"Yes, I'd like to learn a little about how you care for the peafowl," Hermione put in.

Lucius responded, "If you'd like. Perhaps the two of you could chop these flower petals and herbs." Lucius opened another drawer to show where several long knives were kept.

Severus grabbed one knife for himself and another for Hermione. A wire bin kept under the table held an assortment of flowers and herbs. A large tin cup hanging from the bin made it easy to scoop the plants onto the cutting surface of the table. Soon he and Hermione were chopping together almost in rhythm.

Meanwhile, Brax and Lucius concocted the rest of the mash. Brax mixed bran meal and corn meal together, while Lucius chopped up some apples and raisins. When all the ingredients had been chopped to Brax's satisfaction, they were added to the bowl of meal along with some water. Brax used the masher to mash everything together.

"Now it's time for that secret ingredient," Lucius said, grabbing a silver flask from the table and uncapping it.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but that's my little nipping flask, if you know what I mean, sir. Devilish hard pouring the stuff in there, so I don't want to be emptying it into the mash." Brax took the flask from Mr Malfoy and recapped it. Then he lifted a bottle of brandy from a shelf hanging on the wall behind the table. "Here you are, sir."

"All right, Brax," Lucius said with a smile. He poured the brandy into the mash, which Brax now mixed into a thick, pasty substance. Lucius commented, "That's a nice flask you have there. Where'd you get it?"

"Master Draco gave it to me before he left on his trip," Brax said. "That'll do it, sir." Pulling several shallow bowls from the shelf, he began spooning the mash into them. "I'll set these out, and then you can bring the birds in, Mr Malfoy."

"Very well, Brax." Turning to Severus and Hermione, he said, "Thank you for your help in making Brax's bran mash. A lot of it will have to be made over the next several days with the peafowl in the aviary and unable to hunt for themselves. I'm sure that Brax would appreciate any help you wish to give him."

Hermione answered, "Let me know when Brax is making up the next batch, and I'll help him out. I did have one question about the recipe, though. What is the purpose of the brandy, Mr Malfoy?" Hermione asked.

"It provides a mild sedating effect so the peafowl can get used to all being together in the aviary. The peacocks tend to be territorial and protective of their harems, so it is important they be sleepy and disinclined to fight with each other. Brandy is not particularly good for the peafowl, so we decrease the amount each day until they're acclimated to their new location."

"I see. Well, thank you, Mr Malfoy," Hermione said. "I don't know about anyone else, but I am really hungry. I wonder if we can get a late lunch."

"Oh, of course," Lucius answered. "I'm sure Narcissa will be able to round up lunch for you. I need to perform the summoning spell for the peafowl, and then I'll be joining you."

Severus and Hermione entered the house through the Stable Entrance, just as Severus had earlier that morning after his swim. They used the back stairs to get to their rooms and clean up before meeting up at the top of the grand staircase in order to find their hostess. They found her in the dining room where lunch was just ending.

"Severus, Miss Granger, you must be hungry. Let me get everyone settled here, and then there is something I'd like to discuss with you. Severus, why don't you take Miss Granger to the library? I'll have a house-elf bring you each a lunch tray."

Severus gave Narcissa an amused look. "If I take Hermione to the library, she may not come out again for the rest of the week. I will enjoy showing it to her, however."

Indeed, Hermione did seem surprised when she first stepped into the library. She looked around her and breathed, "Oh, my." Most of the library was two stories tall with book shelves lining every wall. A balcony went around the room at the second story level with doors leading to Lucius and Narcissa's suite and another to Draco's room. Spiral staircases led from the balcony to the bottom floor of the library. Windows and skylights allowed the bright, outdoor light to enter the room.

When the house-elf brought their lunch, he set it up on a table in the centre of the room. Hermione and Severus sat down to eat. Narcissa soon joined them. She got straight to her subject. "I hate to bring this up while you're eating, but I am quite worried. My sister Andromeda and her grandson Teddy joined us today. There was an accident, and Teddy was nearly killed!"

Hermione stared at her with alarm. "Is he okay? What happened?"

Narcissa responded, "Teddy wasn't hurt, but I think I know why Draco and Teddy have been attacked. I think someone wants them dead!"

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 3

When the Malfoys host a week-long house party at Malfoy Manor, they are hoping to regain their standing in society and celebrate a happy family event. Instead, a series of unfortunate incidents threatens disaster. Narcissa turns to Hermione and Severus for help.

See Chapter 1 for disclaimers and credit to my reading team.

Hermione couldn't believe she'd heard correctly. "Dead! Why would anyone want Teddy Lupin dead?"

Narcissa looked at her with a hint of disapproval. "I notice you don't ask why anyone would want Draco dead."

Hermione gave a frustrated sigh. "Mrs Malfoy, Draco is 24 years old and has fought in a war. It's quite conceivable that there might be people who would want him dead. There are probably people who want *me* dead. But Teddy is only six years old. Where would he have acquired a mortal enemy along the way?"

Narcissa looked as though she might want to argue the point some more, but Severus said quietly, "Narcissa, I understand you are worried. Let's take everything one step at a time. What happened to Teddy?"

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry, Miss Granger. Andromeda and Teddy came about mid-morning while most of the young people were off on the walking tour. Mr Potter decided he would help entertain Teddy, and they began to play hide-and-seek. Teddy was hiding in the bushes in front of the house when a ceramic flower pot fell from an upstairs window and almost hit him. It could have injured or killed him if it had hit him on the head!"

"Could you tell which window it had fallen from?" Hermione asked.

"Yes. It fell from the conservatory storage room."

Hermione was puzzled, not being able to picture where this room was. Severus asked, "Have you seen the conservatory?" At Hermione's nod, he continued, "At the front end of the conservatory is the winter conservatory room. Above that is the conservatory storage room where the conservatory supplies are kept. It's certainly not unusual for a flower pot to be in that room. The question is how did it fall from the window?"

Hermione asked, "Who is in charge of the conservatory? Do you have a gardener?"

"We have garden-elves," Narcissa answered, "who are in charge of both the conservatory and outdoor gardens. I did ask the garden-elves if anyone had been up in the storage room, and they said they hadn't. It was still morning, and they were working in the outdoor gardens."

"So something out of the ordinary has happened," Severus observed.

"Do you think we should question the guests?" Narcissa asked anxiously. "I don't want to alarm anyone, but I also don't want someone to get hurt."

"You mentioned that you thought you knew why Draco and Teddy have been attacked, Mrs Malfoy," Hermione said. "What do you think is happening?"

"Come with me." Mrs Malfoy led Severus and Hermione to the back of the library. Underneath the balcony was a locked door. Mrs Malfoy tapped the handle with her wand, and the door unlocked in response to her magical signature. They stepped inside the room, and Hermione could feel the climate control spells that were protecting whatever was in this room. When their hostess lit the room, both Hermione and Severus sighed in wonder at what the room held.

Here was a room that held the treasures of the family. Artefacts from the Malfoy family's early days in England, along with Black family treasures Narcissa had inherited, were displayed on tables and in cases. Bookshelves held antique books and scrolls. A table in the centre of the room had a box of white gloves available for those who would be handling the delicate items.

Mrs Malfoy stepped to the table and donned a pair of gloves in a business-like way, indicating with a gesture that Severus and Hermione should do the same. Once they all had their gloves on, Narcissa led them to a wall covered by a drapery. Pulling the drapery aside, she revealed a tapestry that reminded Hermione of something she had seen before.

"Isn't this the Black Family Tree?" Hermione asked. "At least... I think it is." The tapestry was certainly a family tree, and many of the names were the same as the tapestry in Harry's house at Grimmauld Place. However, that's where the similarities ended. This tapestry was in pristine condition. No burn marks appeared anywhere.

"Wait a minute. What is Harry's name doing there?" Looking at the tapestry more carefully, Hermione realised that names that had been burned off Sirius Black's tapestry were still included on this one. There was Sirius's name, and directly underneath was Harry Potter's name, displayed as his heir. "How can Sirius's name be there? He was disowned by his family."

Mrs Malfoy looked at her curiously. "I haven't seen the tapestry at number twelve, Grimmauld Place for years. What does it look like?"

"Well, it's not as well taken care of as this. It's rather dingy," Hermione replied. "There are several names burned off the tapestry, and I think it has fewer names than yours."

"My father always told Aunt Walburga that she would damage her tapestry if she kept blasting names off it. You see, the tapestries aren't just a record of the family. They are a record of the Black Family heirs."

Narcissa pointed to a name on the tapestry. "Cepheus Black was my great-great-great-grandfather. Up to his time, the Black fortune was passed from oldest son to oldest son. Cepheus accumulated a vast fortune of his own. He decided to divide his fortune more fairly amongst his descendants. His oldest child, Sirius, died as a boy. His youngest child, Isla, married a Muggle and was disowned. That left Phineas Nigellus and Elladora. While Cepheus was willing to flout tradition enough to try to divide his fortune amongst his descendants, he wasn't willing to let a daughter directly inherit. Wizards just did not do that at the time.

"So he set up a trust for the female heirs of his line. As long as the daughter didn't marry a Muggle or wasn't otherwise disowned, the Black Family Trust would grant a Black heiress an allowance during her lifetime and at her death would pass on her share of the fortune to her male heirs and an interest in the Trust to her female heirs."

"It looks as though Elladora didn't have any heirs. What happened in her case?" Hermione asked.

"She received her allowance until she died. As she didn't have any children, the Trust was not passed through her to her sons. Everything reverted to Phineas Nigellus Black. Apparently, there was some frustration shared by Cepheus and Phineas Nigellus that Elladora never married. Phineas Nigellus wanted to encourage his own children to marry and produce children to keep the Black family line strong. He added some details to the Black Family Trust. As children often couldn't inherit from their parents until they were quite a bit older, the Trust would pay an allowance to every child once they came of age. If they married before the age of 25, the Trust would give a large increase in order for the Black inheritors to be able to support a family."

"And that's the reason why it is important for Draco to marry soon?" Severus asked.

"Yes. Lucius and I would provide Draco an extra allowance if he didn't marry until after he was 25, but Draco has become rather independent and prefers not to rely on his parents for funds."

"And what about Harry?" Hermione asked. "How is it that he was able to inherit from Sirius since Sirius was disowned?"

Narcissa replied, "The fact is that Sirius *wasn't* disowned. I'm sure that his mother told him that he was disowned, and she must have blasted his name from the tapestry in the Black Family home. However, the entail of the estate was set up with the goblins, and there are very definite rules to being disowned. Uncle Orion was already not well by that time, and I suppose he never got around to actually disowning Sirius. That's why his name still appears on this tapestry. As to why Mr Potter is his heir, I would guess that James and Lily Potter named Sirius as Harry's guardian in their wills. That would give Sirius the ability to name Harry as an heir of the Black Family fortune."

"That makes sense," Hermione responded. "Now, let's say that Draco and Teddy were attacked because of the Black Family fortune. That would eliminate the heirs of your father Cygnus Black. What would happen to his share of the fortune?"

"It would then move up to the next oldest sibling. As you can see, the next oldest sibling was Alphard, who was disowned when he gave Sirius money to run away from home. Aunt Walburga is the oldest in this family, which would mean that Harry Potter would inherit my father's share of the fortune."

Hermione dismissed that notion. "Harry doesn't care about money, and he'd never hurt Teddy. He takes his role as Teddy's godfather very seriously." She studied the tapestry. "If I understand this tapestry correctly, if Draco, Teddy and Harry were not around to inherit, then the whole of your great-grandfather's line would be ended. The next oldest sibling of your great-grandfather Cygnus Black would be his sister Belvina Black Burke. The eventual heir in her line is Rolf Scamander. Next up the line from Belvina is Arcturus Black. Not counting disowned family members, he too only has one eventual heir: Neville Longbottom. Finally, we reach the eldest sibling, Sirius. My, that's a popular name in your family, isn't it, Mrs Malfoy? That Sirius has several heirs. One is Harry through Walburga's husband, Orion Black. The others would be Rita Skeeter or Molly Weasley's children. How can Molly Weasley be an heir of the Black Family?"

"My father's cousin, Lucretia, was Ignatius Prewett's second wife," Narcissa answered. "When they married, she adopted his three children as her own. Molly doesn't seem to have made use of her allowance, though. Perhaps she refused it in a show of loyalty to Arthur since his mother was disowned from the family and Arthur is, therefore, not allowed to inherit."

"Would that keep her children from inheriting?" Severus asked.

"I wouldn't think so," said Narcissa. "They should have access to the allowance of the Black Family, but I am not well enough acquainted with the Weasley family to know or guess what they have done in regards to their inheritances."

"Isn't it ironic that there are a number of Black Family heirs here at Malfoy Manor this week?" Hermione mused. "Let's assume for a moment that your theory is correct, Mrs Malfoy, and Black Family heirs are being targeted. Perhaps the best form of protection is for all of us to be involved in some activity together. All the potential victims would be in public view. Hopefully, the attacker would be less likely to strike. Would you agree, Severus?"

"Yes. This might be a good time to put your earlier suggestion to Lucius into effect," he replied.

"What suggestion?" Hermione couldn't remember a suggestion to Mr Malfoy.

"Your suggestion of a maze race. We can hold it for the charity with everyone encouraged to at least come and watch. What do you think, Narcissa?" he asked, turning to their hostess.

"I'll have the house-elves ask everyone to come to the music room in about half an hour. Will that be enough time for you to organise a race?"

"Yes, I'm sure it will," Hermione answered. She and Severus quickly came up with a format for a race with a currently undetermined amount of people. Hermione had a few minutes to freshen up and went up to her room. She had come to admire Narcissa Malfoy's taste in decorating. Her room was in soft peach tones with a lovely sitting area. Even though her bedroom was an interior room, it was charmed with a window that showed one of the many views from the house's actual windows. Currently, the view was of the rose garden spread out behind the manor. Hermione hoped to have the chance to study the intricate magic involved in this charm work.

For right now, though, she just wanted to put her feet up after her long walk. She snuggled back into the chair and put her feet on the ottoman with a sigh of relief. Closing her eyes, she thought about what Mrs Malfoy had told her. Could it be true Draco and Teddy were attacked? Hermione didn't trust any of the Malfoys farther than she could throw them. Could Mrs Malfoy be lying for some reason? It didn't escape Hermione's notice that the Malfoys were in charge of the guest list for the week. Nearly everyone here was a part of the Black family tree. She shook her head. There was not enough information yet; this was something to be investigated.

She had two veteran investigators staying right here at Malfoy Manor. Should she alert Ron and Harry? No, having Ron and Harry investigate would be a conflict of interest, considering their place on the Black family tree as victims or...as unlikely as it seemed to her...possible perpetrators. Severus was someone she had often trusted to help her with investigations, but would his friendship with the Malfoys be a concern?

She sighed again, this time in frustration. With any luck, Mrs Malfoy was mistaken, and Draco's and Teddy's "accidents" were, in fact, only accidents. Time would tell; all she could do was keep her eyes and ears open.

Just then, Nolly appeared with a pop in Hermione's room. "The mistress is asking all guests to come to the music room, Miss Hermione Granger."

"Thank you, Nolly," Hermione answered. She went down the long staircase and down the hallway past the drawing room until she reached the door of the music room. Entering quietly, she noticed that all the seating in the room, elegantly decorated in gold and beige, generally angled toward one end of the room where a harp and a grand piano sat. Plenty of light from the windows which overlooked the front lawn of the manor spilled on the two instruments.

Hermione noticed that most of the house guests had already assembled in the room. They were currently watching Daphne's attempt to entertain them at the piano with a rather mediocre...even to Hermione's untrained ear...rendition of Beethoven's "Für Elise". When Daphne finished, her performance was greeted by mild applause. She smiled and curtsied prettily.

Daphne was about to sit down at the piano again when Mrs Malfoy crossed the room to her. "Thank you, Daphne. It was kind of you to entertain us for a few minutes." Mrs Malfoy gave her future daughter-in-law a polite smile and waited for her to be seated before saying, "Thank you for coming. As you know, our purpose this week is to benefit the Widows and Orphans of War Fund. Miss Granger is the treasurer for the charity and has suggested an activity that should be entertaining and allow us to raise a little money for the fund. Miss Granger, would you like to present your idea?"

Hermione walked to a spot where she could easily be seen by the seated guests and nodded to her hostess. "Thank you, Mrs Malfoy. This morning on our walk, I noticed

there is a hedge maze on the property and thought it might be fun to have a race. Everyone who wants to enter the race will pay two galleons, which will go to the charity. Side bets by the spectators will be accepted..."

As Hermione continued describing how the race would operate, she saw a spark of interest from her listeners. If everyone was interested, there would be strength in numbers, which was the best protection against any potential threats to the guests at Malfoy Manor. The party adjourned to the maze where garden-elves had set up seating for the participants and observers under the direction of Mr Malfoy.

Once Hermione arrived, Mr Malfoy directed the garden-elves to take their instructions from her to finish the final details of setting up. Hermione walked around the outside of the maze, checking to make sure that everything was ready. She was walking along the side farthest away from the house when she heard Mr Malfoy's voice from the other side of the hedge.

"I'm not the man for you, Phaedra," Hermione heard Lucius Malfoy say. "Why don't you try Severus?"

"How would you suggest I approach him?" Mrs Zabini asked.

"Just tell him what you want. You don't need to seduce him; he doesn't like to feel manipulated."

Hermione froze in her tracks. She couldn't believe that Mrs Zabini had come on to Mr Malfoy, and he had turned her down with a suggestion that she try *Severus*! Hermione felt a sudden surge of anger. She hurried away, finishing her inspection of the maze and returning back to her starting point.

A table had been set up for the gathering of money from the racers and those who were betting on the races. Draco Malfoy, who wasn't planning to race due to his knowledge of the maze, was in charge of collecting the money and keeping track of the bets and entrance fees. Podgis Pimpleton, in his capacity as Minister of Financial Oversight, sat next to Draco to make sure that everything was accounted for.

Most of the younger guests decided to participate in the race. The maze had four entrances, so Hermione divided the racers into groups of four. The racing groups were: Pansy, Daphne, Ashton and Pierce; Harry, Ron, Neville and Rolf; and Ginny, Hannah, Luna and Astoria.

Teddy Lupin was anxious to get in on the fun as well. "Granny, I want to race, too!" he said to Andromeda. He next ran up to Harry. "Harry, I want to race with you!"

Hermione, Severus and Draco conferred for a moment. Hermione announced, "We'll have a fourth group made up of Teddy, Harry, Draco and me. Harry's second race will be for participation only."

"Yes!" Teddy shouted. He ran back to his grandmother. "Granny, I get to race Harry *and* Cousin Draco!"

Pleased that no one's feelings had been hurt so far, especially not Teddy's, Hermione suggested that any who wished to could place bets. Pansy and Daphne, along with their brothers Pierce and Ashton, were to be the first group. As Draco sat down at his spot at the betting table, he said to Podgis Pimpleton, "I'll start off the betting by placing ten galleons on my lovely bride-to-be!"

Daphne giggled and said, "I'm not sure that's a good bet, Draco. I'll probably just get hopelessly lost. I know you, however; so, I'm going to bet five galleons o-o-o-on... Teddy Lupin!"

This drew a general laugh. Teddy ran up to Daphne, gave her a big hug and said, "I won't let you down, Cousin-to-be Daphne!"

Daphne blinked in surprise but then smiled at the little boy. "I know you won't, Teddy."

Ron swaggered up to the table and said, "I'm going to bet five galleons on myself."

Neville laughed and said, "My money's on Harry. After all, he has experience in maze racing."

Amid the laughter that followed, Hermione glanced at Harry. He was smiling, but to her eyes, it looked a bit forced. Apparently, Ron had predicted correctly that this event would bring back bad memories of Harry's quest to win the Triwizard Tournament. Harry was making concessions for the Widows and Orphans of War Fund, just as she was.

Luna said in her dreamy voice, "Rolf is much more in tune with nature than either Ron or Harry, and he knows how to avoid the disorienting influence of Nargles. I'm going to bet ten galleons on Rolf."

"I don't know if you should give me that much credit with Nargles, sweetheart, but I'll do my best," Rolf responded. He turned toward Draco. "I'll bet ten galleons on Luna." Not to be outdone, Harry and Neville placed bets on their wives.

The older guests got into the spirit of the event, as well. To Hermione's surprise, Mrs Zabini offered a cash prize to the winner of each race, a larger prize to the overall winner, and a generous donation to the charity.

Madam Marchbanks and Mrs Longbottom were having a spirited discussion. Madam Marchbanks said, "Poppycock, Augusta! The girl is a professional athlete...well, a retired professional athlete. With reflexes like hers, she's bound to win!"

"Poppycock, Griselda!" Augusta mimicked back to her. "What do Quidditch reflexes have to do with finding one's way through a maze? You should see the store room at the Leaky Cauldron. Hannah has to navigate a maze of boxes, shelves and who-knows-what-all to find anything there. I'll wager 25...no 50!...50 galleons on Hannah!"

"I'll match that with 50 galleons on Ginevra Potter! Did you get both of those, Podgis?"

"Yes, Griselda," Podgis replied with a little bow towards Madam Marchbanks.

"Now, on to the first race, Griselda," Augusta continued. "Have you seen the musculature on the Greengrass boy? He's a mighty fine specimen."

"He is indeed, Augusta, although the young Parkinson lad has nothing to be ashamed of in the muscle department, if I do say so myself." The two elderly ladies put their heads together and spoke in lower tones as they debated what wager to place on the first race.

Mr Scamander put a large wager on his grandson. Clapping Rolf on the shoulder, Mr Scamander said, "If you can find your way through the rain forest, my boy, you should be able to locate the centre of a maze."

Hermione was pleased to see all the guests having fun while raising money for the charity. Severus, on the other hand, was less than pleased when Mrs Zabini announced that, as she was sponsoring the race, she wished to help judge the results.

Severus, who was supposed to be judging, was about to cede his role as judge to her when he happened to glance at Hermione. Why was she looking at him with that worried expression? Severus supposed that Hermione was worried that he would insult Phaedra, so he smiled as graciously as he could, offered her his arm, and said, "Of course. Allow me to escort you, and we'll judge together."

Phaedra took his arm, saying, "Why, thank you Severus." As they were turning to leave, Severus glanced at Hermione again to offer her a smile of support. Now, why was she looking... disappointed?

He escorted Phaedra into the maze. Once inside, he walked to the spot Lucius had described. With a flick of his wand, he uttered, "*Revelio!*" This opened a shortcut

through the hedges to the centre of the maze. He motioned for Phaedra to precede him to the tree that marked the finish point.

When he arrived, he said, "*Finite incantatem!*" and the hedges closed back upon themselves. Looking around the circle where he and Phaedra were standing, he realised that there was little there but the tree. With another spell, he transfigured two comfortable chairs in the shade of the tree and gestured for Mrs Zabini to take her pick. Once they were both seated, he pulled an old-fashioned stopwatch from his pocket and then sent a shower of red sparks in the air as a signal that they were ready for the races to begin.

"There now, we're ready to begin. Each witch or wizard will send up a shower of sparks when they reach their assigned entrance," Severus explained. "Then I'll send up a signal when they are to begin the race, and we keep track of how much time it takes for the winner to get here."

"I see," replied Phaedra. "Is it a difficult maze? Have you ever tried it?"

"I have," Severus answered. "Every few years Lucius changes the path slightly. The maze is never very hard when you look at it from a broomstick. When you're inside the maze with the hedges taller than you are, it's fairly easy to get disoriented."

A shower of sparks appeared from the entrance of the maze closest to the house, followed soon after by the signals from the other racers. Severus moved so he was away from the tree before shooting off the sparks that would begin the race. Sitting down again, he said, "Now, we wait."

A giggle sounded from one corner of the maze while pounding footsteps sounded from another direction followed by a sigh of annoyance. Phaedra said, "Severus, I..."

Severus held up his hand to silence her and said very quietly, "We don't want to give them any hints as to where they are in the maze, so we must be quiet." Phaedra gave an exasperated sigh and leaned back in her chair...rather like a petulant child, Severus thought.

"You two should get a room," came a whispered comment from somewhere in the maze.

"Shut up, what if someone hears you? Old Snape has sharp ears," a low male voice said. Severus and Phaedra looked at each other smiling, amused at the libidos of the young. Severus found himself wondering whether Pansy and Ashton Greengrass had been seeing each other long or if Ashton and Pierce Parkinson were more than just old school chums.

"Please, Pansy, you'll ruin everything," a decidedly female voice responded. Daphne? Daphne and Pierce? Severus found himself troubled by this development. He didn't usually care to get tangled in other people's romantic liaisons, but this involved the Malfoys. He glanced at Phaedra to see if she had drawn the same conclusions. Seeing the speculative gleam in her eye, Severus gave a small sigh. In true Slytherin fashion, Phaedra was thinking about what use she could make of this information.

Before Severus could come to any conclusions about how to handle the situation, Ashton jogged into their small circle. "Did I win?" he asked, a little breathless.

Recalled to their duties as judges, Phaedra and Severus both stood. Phaedra smiled and handed Ashton the prize money. "Indeed you did," she answered. "Congratulations."

Severus sent up the sparks which signalled that someone had won the race. Looking at his stop watch, he cast a Sonorous at his throat and said, "Ashton Greengrass. Five minutes, 26 seconds. If racers cannot find their way out of the maze, please shoot a volley of sparks so we can assist you." Removing the spell from his voice, he also congratulated Ashton, who left to make way for the new racers.

Severus paced around the circle, trying to appear nonchalant as he waited for the next group to make their way to the entrances. Phaedra sat watching him, looking as though she were trying to figure him out. Once Severus had given the signal for the next race to begin, he sat down. First casting a Muffliato so they would not be overheard, he said in stiff tones, "I do hope, Phaedra, you won't use what you've heard to embarrass Lucius and Narcissa."

"After all, they've invited me for the week, even though I'm almost as much a pariah in society as they are?" Phaedra queried in an ironic tone. She appeared to be thinking over what he had to say, although Severus rather thought she was just trying to make him nervous with suspense. He was trying not to let that tactic work.

"Frankly, Severus," she continued after a few moments, "I learned a long time ago not to meddle in Slytherin marriages. I certainly didn't want anyone meddling in mine. As for Daphne, she's only emulating her mother. Philomena has had more partners than I. I, at least, married mine... eventually. I suspect that Daphne is quite looking forward to marriage. It actually makes it easier for a pureblood witch in some respects. However, she is being rather indiscreet by not waiting until after she's safely married. Personally, I would..."

"Stop, please," Severus said. He was aware, of course, that fidelity was not one of the expectations of many Slytherin marriages, but he always felt rather disconcerted when confronted with the fact. He knew himself well enough to know that his jealous nature would not be able to tolerate such behaviour in a wife, which was one of many reasons why he had never married. He felt that Draco would probably have difficulty with such an attitude from his wife, not because Draco was a jealous sort, but because his parents so clearly loved each other. No matter what could be said about the general life choices Lucius and Narcissa had made, Severus very much doubted if they had ever strayed from their marriage vows.

"We can talk about other subjects, if you prefer," Phaedra said. "In fact, I was hoping to talk to you about something that's been on my mind quite a bit lately."

Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley suddenly ran through the opening in the hedge, wands drawn. Harry looked worried. "Are you all right, Severus? Mrs Zabini? We sensed magic being used and came as quickly as we could..." Harry's babbling came to a gradual end. Severus supposed it had finally occurred to Harry that his two supposed victims were quite all right.

With an obvious wand movement, Severus cancelled the Muffliato spell. "As you can see, Mr Potter, we are just fine." Severus didn't sound as indignant as he'd intended. He didn't know whether to be annoyed or relieved that Phaedra had been interrupted when she had apparently been about to reveal what she wanted from him.

"See there, mate?" Weasley said to Potter. "Nothing to worry about, and it looks like we won the race." Annoyance drained away because Severus understood that Harry had been reminded of his experiences the last time he had been in a hedge maze.

Rising from his chair, Severus shot a shower of red sparks in the air and once more announced the winner of the race so that the bets could be paid accordingly. "Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, tied at four minutes, 45 seconds." Removing the spell he said, "Congratulations, Mr Potter. Mr Weasley." Phaedra also congratulated them and handed them their winnings.

Once Potter and Weasley left, Severus was afraid that Phaedra would once more try to tell him what she wanted from him. Instead, Phaedra seemed busy doing something else. She pulled an envelope from the pocket of her robes which looked to be a duplicate of the envelopes she had given to the winners of the races thus far. Emptying the galleons from the envelope, she pointed her wand at the empty envelope and said, "*Geminio!*" Another envelope appeared. She refilled the first envelope and pulled out a bag of coins to get the galleons needed to fill the other. "I wasn't expecting there to be a tie," she said. "Now we should be ready for the final two races."

Severus gave the signal to start and sat down in his chair. Phaedra cast the Muffliato spell herself. "I didn't know that one. It's always good to learn a new spell, especially one so useful. Now, if you don't mind, I'd really like to talk to you about...Aaaah!" she finished with a little shriek, staring in fear at something behind him.

Severus turned to see what had caused her reaction. The shortcut through the maze that Severus and Phaedra had taken to get to the centre had opened. Luna Lovegood was walking towards them wearing some strange glasses with spirals on the lenses. When she got to the tree, she stopped and removed them. "That was much easier than I expected," she said cheerfully.

"How did you find that pathway?" Severus asked, incredulous.

"Are you saying something, Professor Snape? I can't hear you," Luna answered.

"Phaedra, cancel the spell," Severus reminded her.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was just so surprised." Phaedra cancelled the Muffliato spell and stood up to walk around the circle as she listened to Luna's explanation.

"I said, how did you find that pathway?" Severus repeated.

"Oh, that was easy! Wrackspurts were hiding the entrance, but the Spectrespecs take care of them," Luna explained as though she actually thought she was making sense.

"Oh," was all Severus said. Remembering his duties, he raised his wand and gave off the signal that the race had been completed. As he had before, he announced, "Luna Lovegood: 24 seconds."

A triumphant whoop sounded from among the spectators. "That's my girl!" Rolf Scamander shouted.

Luna smiled widely. "I love him," she told Severus and Phaedra.

Phaedra offered her congratulations with an answering smile. "You're a lucky girl, Luna. Here is your prize."

"Yes, congratulations," Severus echoed.

"Thank you," Luna said and started to walk back the way she had come. "Oh, do you want me to close this or leave it open?"

"Close it, please, if you would," Phaedra responded.

"All right." She left, and it wasn't long before the hedges returned to their usual appearance.

"How did she do that?" Phaedra asked. "What are Wrackspurts?"

"I'm afraid you'd have to ask Miss Lovegood... but not while I'm around, please," Severus answered.

Sparks had been appearing at the various entrances as the racers took their places for the last race. Teddy Lupin, who didn't yet have a wand, was going to shout when he got to his spot. They waited... and waited. Finally, Harry called out, "Everything okay, Teddy?"

Teddy's voice quavered a little. "These hedges are awfully tall. Harry, I'm scared."

"Anyone mind if I race with Teddy?" Harry asked. "I'm not racing for a prize this time." Hearing no objections, Harry said, "Okay, Teddy, I'm coming."

"Hooray!" Teddy shouted. "Listen, Harry, I've got a plan!"

"Okay, sport, we'll race however you want. Just don't shout out your plan for everyone to hear," Harry responded with a laugh.

After much low-voiced conversing, Harry shot sparks from his wand to indicate Team Teddy was ready. Severus gave the signal to start, and the race commenced.

Phaedra said in an exasperated tone, "Finally! Severus, there is really something I need to ask you."

"Yes, of course, Phaedra. I know we've been interrupted several times. I'm listening."

Footsteps pounded and giggles came from Teddy who shouted, "Keep your hand on the hedge, Harry! Keep your hand on the hedge!"

"I'm right behind you, sport!" Harry answered back.

Phaedra and Severus smiled in amusement. Apparently, Teddy was following the tried and often-true maze running rule: If a person keeps his left hand on the left hedge, he may have a long way to run but will eventually find the finish. Judging by the running footsteps, Teddy was hoping that if he ran fast enough, he would be there first.

Bringing himself back to the question that Phaedra had for him, Severus said, "Please continue."

"Oh, yes." Phaedra appeared to be gathering her thoughts. "Severus, you seem like a man who appreciates a direct approach, so let me get right to the point. For some time now, I've been considering a change in my life, and I've become convinced that you may be the only one who can help me."

Harry's breathless voice came from somewhere close by. "Teddy, you keep on going. I can't keep up with you, buddy. I'll catch my breath and follow along in a bit."

Severus realised that Harry was good with children. Harry was an Auror and was surely fit enough to keep up with a child. He must be giving Teddy the chance to overcome his fear and to win all by himself.

Phaedra interrupted his thoughts. "Severus, are you listening?"

"Ow! Ow!" shouted Teddy.

"Teddy, what's wrong?" Harry asked, starting to run after his godson.

From another part of the maze, Draco shouted, "Granger, did you cast this? Shite, that hurts!"

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?" Hermione shouted, sounding more puzzled than angry. "Aaaaaah!" she screamed.

"Hermione?" Severus called. There was no answer. "Hermione!"