

The Iago Complex

by Proulxes

What happens when a new relationship is threatened? A story for HBAR, combining politics, passion and peacock shit.

Chapter 1: A new beginning

Chapter 1 of 13

What happens when a new relationship is threatened? A story for HBAR, combining politics, passion and peacock shit.

The Iago Complex

Chapter 1: A new beginning

Heavy breathing.

Bodies fall apart, panting. Sweaty sheets curl about them, tangling legs and arms together.

"That was..."

"What?"

"..."

"What? *Severus* don't you *dare!*"

"This was..."

"Don't do this it was *not* a mistake!"

"I was going to say *surprising*. What did...?"

"*Oh*. Yes. Well. *Surprising... obviously*. But not a mistake."

A gentle, sweaty kiss... the cupping of a cheek. A tendril of hair brushed back from a worried brow. "Can I see more of you again?"

A smile, tentative and unsure... but growing in confidence. "Yes. Yes, of course but..."

The frown deepens. "But...?"

"Can we just keep this... *whatever this is...* between ourselves for a while? It's all so brand new, and I don't want to..."

"Absolutely. I am the very soul of discretion."

"I love the way you say 'absolutely'... Can I stay tonight?"

"*Absolutely.*"

"I gather that Snape has shacked up with Granger," Draco drawled, spearing a quail egg with his fork and popping it into his mouth.

"Hmmm?" Lucius flicked his newspaper idly.

"Snape. Granger. Shagging. Each other, apparently."

"What a hideous prospect."

"Quite."

During the subsequent pause, Lucius Malfoy pretended to read an article about the latest winner of *Witch Weekly's* 'Most Potente Potioneer Award'. The seconds dragged by, marked by the slow ticking of the large clock on the wall of the breakfast room.

Lucius cast a careful look at his son from beneath his eyelashes. They had barely spoken since Draco had arrived at the Manor at an unacceptably late hour the previous night, bearing a bottle of Old Ogden's Superior and a copy of the letter that Lucius had received from Narcissa's solicitors the day before. They had consumed the whiskey in near silence, and Lucius had refused to discuss anything beyond the upcoming Ministry elections and the infallibility of Pelliwigs' Patented Anti-Dandruff Preparation before sending the boy upstairs to bed.

Draco still wore his hair swept back from his face, as he had done at school, and his features were carefully schooled into a mask of polite interest, his heavy-lidded eyes focused entirely on the range of delicacies that the house-elves had prepared for their brunch. Lucius flicked his attention back to the newspaper in his hands.

Draco had begun to run to fat recently. His quilted dressing gown was pulled tightly about his girth, the silk straining slightly about his waist. Boredom and inactivity did not suit the young man.

"And you know this fascinating piece of tittle-tattle, *how?*"

Draco smirked, chewing slowly. "Parkinson heard it from Greengrass, who heard it from Davis, who heard it from Bulstrode, who heard it from Zabini, who *inferred* it from something that Nott said."

Lucius cocked his eyebrow slowly. "Nott?"

Draco leaned forward and captured another egg. "Nott is working at the School as one of the Charms professors now," he sniffed, popping the egg into his mouth. The house-elves were definitely getting better at soft boiling them.

His father quirked an eyebrow and essayed a small sneer. "I see the Notts have fallen so low as to enter the..." A dramatic pause for suitable effect. "... *service* professions."

Draco snorted. "Nevertheless, a reliable source," the boy continued, taking a judicious bite out of a lightly toasted crumpet. "He always did have a soft spot for Mu..." His father shot him a swift and piercing look. "...uggleborns," Draco finished smoothly, barely missing a beat, nonchalantly tracing his fingers over the fine silver tines of his fork.

"According to Nott, Snape was practically *fawning* over her in the Three Broomsticks last night," he added unnecessarily.

"*Fawning?*" Lucius' eyebrow rose.

Draco's mouth twisted. "Apparently, he bought her cognac and talked with her all evening. There was some... physical proximity."

"How entirely revolting," Lucius turned another page in his newspaper, wondering why the news of such a supposed liaison had reached Draco quite so quickly. "I should have thought that Severus was far too... experienced... to behave in such a fashion." He flicked another quick glance at his son before taking a sip from his teacup, wincing slightly at the scalding temperature of the liquid. "And with *Granger*, you say? I would never have thought it possible. Buck-toothed, dowdy little thing. Potter's friend, wasn't she? I barely knew her."

If Draco noted this latest example of his father's selective amnesia on the subject of Granger's incarceration at the Manor, he was clearly far too polite to comment.

Instead, the younger man hummed a little in agreement and selected a small devilled kidney from the silver platter, twirling it slightly on the end of his fork. "She tamed the mane and had her teeth done in the fourth year. But she is still an appalling harridan with a vicious temper *and* an overbearingly detestable addiction to her own intelligence." He ate the kidney. "I cannot imagine what Severus sees in her."

Lucius carefully took a sip from his coffee and replaced the cup in its saucer, refusing to allow his eyebrows to rise. *So that was it, then?* "I'm sorry to see that you are so upset, my dear boy," he said indifferently, turning another page.

Draco's cheeks took on a faint pinkish tinge, but he remained impressively impassive. Lucius tensed slightly, waiting for the pup's next move.

"A passing fancy, nothing more," Draco said eventually. "Try the kidneys; they are excellent."

Lucius grunted, shifting his position slightly in the uncomfortable chair. "I do not care for offal, thank you."

*

Silence descended, broken only by the faint sounds of fork and knife on plate, the gentle rattle of cup on saucer, and the rustle of Lucius' paper.

Draco looked about him at the faded wallpaper and the cracked paint on the patio windows. His eyes wandered further. The bright morning sunlight was fighting its way into the room through windowpanes that were grimy and marked in places by dirt and spiders' webs. Aside from the polished mahogany table at which they sat, the rest of the room looked... *neglected*. The various paintings on the walls were hanging slightly askew and dust had collected on the frames' edges. The wood of the sideboard needed a good polish. The silver of the various hunting trophies and candelabras sitting on it was tarnishing.

Indeed, Draco realised, once one had sniffed beyond the aromas of the lovely cooked breakfast, the room even *melt* uncared for, a combination of stale aromas and unhealthy damp. This, coupled with the crumpled parchment letter in his pyjama's breast pocket and the recent news from Hogwarts, spurred him onwards.

He took another leisurely look about the room, making sure that he was observed by his father, before casually saying, "Are you having trouble with your house-elves, Father?"

His father did not reply, but the knuckles gripping the sides of the upturned newspaper whitened, and the broadsheet shook slightly in Lucius' grip.

Taking a silent breath, Draco pressed further. "And what do you propose to do in the face of mother's abandonment?"

*

For a moment, Lucius considered ignoring him, but Draco reached into his dressing gown and withdrew a hatefully familiar envelope, placing it with precision on the table top by the side of Lucius' teacup.

He lowered the paper and raised an eyebrow.

"I know that she left you last month," Draco said. "I know that she took the house-elves with her you ordered this breakfast in, didn't you?"

The eyebrow rose higher. The eye beneath it was fixed and unblinking.

Thus encouraged, Draco leaned forward. Lucius could see the faint flush on the boy's cheeks spreading and deepening. Draco had never found hiding his emotions easy.

"What would you say, Father, if I asked you to help me, but in helping me, you would also help *yourself*?"

*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*

Standard disclaimer: I do not own these characters. Please don't sue me. This story would not have been possible without the support of beawesley2 and clairvoyant, who are both fabulous, nagandsev for her admin expertise... and HBAR, for whom this story is dedicated. I hope you enjoy it!

Chapter 2: The Morning After the Night Before

Chapter 2 of 13

It's a bit angsty... but with a romantic sort of twinge at the end...

Chapter 2: The Morning After the Night Before

Hermione awoke with a shiver, alone. She was sprawled naked across the sheets of an unfamiliar bed with her hair over her eyes, a dry mouth, and the worst hangover she could ever remember experiencing since the Victory Party of 1998.

It was dark in the room, but a greenish glimmer from some sort of liquid lamp on the side table lit the room with a dullish glow, and a bright shaft of pale light from the crack in the doorway told her that it was morning.

She shut her eyes again. It took a moment for her to assemble her scattered wits. When the blurred memories of the past few hours returned, a nauseous adrenaline rush in her stomach and a cringing sense of dread joined her pounding headache in competing for attention.

In time to each painful thump of her pulse, her mind began to replay some key scenes before her closed eyes.

She saw herself dressed in plain robes and sensible shoes, sitting alone in the Three Broomsticks (as usual), waiting for her solitary supper to be brought to her table, a large glass of elf-made wine before her.

The pub was full and rowdy, and as usual, Hermione was sitting alone at a quiet table, shrinking back into the shadows.

Oh... no...

The next image that shimmered into her beleaguered mind was her surprise at seeing her ex-Professor and now colleague approach her lonely seat. That was soon supplanted by her pleasure at his attention, her invitation for him to sit down.

More wine... and a Firewhisky for him.

He had been his usual self sharp tongued and snaggle toothed. Scathing in his condemnation of the latest generation of students who were blundering about in his classroom, witty and scornful in his assessment of the Ministry's latest attempts to rehabilitate ex-Death Eaters and their families, thoughtful and engaged in describing his private research into targeted healing potions.

She remembered the puddle of warmth she'd felt when his fingers had brushed against hers as he sketched out the design of the newly built Muggle Museum of Transport in Glasgow (of all places!), the thrill of excitement as he carelessly suggested that she might join him in a visit there.

She next saw herself order a brandy to keep up with his Firewhiskies.

Then another.

Now a sardonic eyebrow swam to the forefront of her memory, a twitch of his expressive lips sending a shiver of anticipation through her as she watched him in the flickering lamplight of the pub, not believing how attractive and dashing he had suddenly become.

The ring of the last orders bell brought a whispered suggestion that he join her in her quarters for a nightcap. His gallant acceptance of her invitation had made her giddy with expectation and delight.

As the images began to speed up and coalesce into a moving memory of what happened next, Hermione groaned a little on the bed. Slowly she dragged her left hand up to her face to brush away the hair from her eyes as she recalled the cool rush of the evening's air as they left the pub, arm in unsteady arm.

They hadn't made it to her quarters. The dungeons had been closer with fewer stairs.

She shivered again as the breeze from her left raised fresh goose bumps on her skin. The door to his living room was ajar. She pulled the rumpled sheet over herself reflexively and pushed herself more fully upright on the bed, casting her eyes about for her clothing in the poor light.

A sudden, disorientating memory, of her shucking off her robes in enthusiastic haste in his living room while pulling at his clothing at the same time, caused her to shut her eyes in cringing embarrassment.

Was it too much to hope that her wand would have followed her into the bedroom...?

She looked hopefully about her.

No chance.

However, on the bedside table beside the lamp, she did notice a small phial of milky liquid with a parchment propped carefully against it.

It said, "*Drink Me, Professor*" in a perfect, flowing script.

With no further thought, Hermione flopped over towards the edge of the bed, grabbed the bottle and pulled off the stopper with her teeth.

She sniffed the contents. *Hyssop... peppermint... cloves.... Thank Nimue!*

She downed it in one grateful gulp, feeling the restorative potion wash through her system.

However, as the throbbing in her head and the sickness in her stomach abated, a new, horrible clarity settled upon her.

She suddenly remembered absolutely everything in appallingly specific detail.

A deep flush rose through the base of her chest to her hairline.

She replayed his expressions, his actions from the night before. Her actions. His... Oh, bloody hell. Had she really begged him to...? Had she howled? Oh, Merlin she had bitten him!

She had to get out of there!

Tentatively, she strained her ears to hear if there were any noises from the adjoining room.

It was obviously morning, but she had no idea of the time there was no clock in the room, and her watch had clearly gone the same way as everything else she had been wearing. An absurd hope sprung within her. Perhaps he had left her alone? Had he gone to breakfast... gone for a walk... allowed her to creep away from her shameful, *wanton* behaviour of the previous evening and lick her wounds in private....

As if on cue, a muffled thump and a quiet curse drifted through the open door.

There was another scuffling noise and a scuffed step on a flagstone floor... then the sound of a throat being cleared on the opposite side of the door.

"Miss...Prof...Gran...Hermione?"

With a small but heartfelt groan, Hermione allowed her head to fall back to the rumpled sheets.

She was going to have to go out and face him.

*

On the other side of the door, Severus Snape heard her heartfelt whimper at his words and understood that the woman in his bedchamber was regretting their liaison.

He scowled.

Of course.

Realising that he was fiddling with his neck *again*, he shoved his hands into the pockets of his dressing gown and turned back to the heavy sludge that passed for coffee according to house-elves at Hogwarts.

For a moment, as the liquid scorched his sensitive throat, he thought he should simply leave her to it. His eyes darted over to where her clothes were laid on the back of his shabby couch. Perhaps he should send them through to her. He could see her wand, carelessly disregarded, and thought that he should perhaps. But then he damned himself for an idiot; the woman was perfectly capable of a simple *Accio*, after all.

He replaced the empty coffee cup on the table in front of him, and as he straightened up again, he caught a glimpse in the long mirror beside his desk of the purplish bruise in the centre of his chest.

Feeling his cheeks heat at the memory, he straightened his dressing gown, self-consciously pulling the old nightshirt across his chest to cover up the bruising. He should have got changed when he slipped out of bed earlier. As his fingers brushed over the sensitive spot, a small electrical pulse seemed to shoot from the tender area to his lower belly. He winced and shifted his hips, sternly reminding himself that the last thing the recently ravished Miss Granger would want to see when she eventually emerged from his bedchamber would be her erstwhile Potions professor with a bright red face and a raging hard on.

When she emerged... He checked the clock on the wall, then flicked his attention to the small pile of her clothing on his sofa. She was taking a hell of a long time getting up. At this rate, they would both miss breakfast, which would cause no small amount of comment, given how many of their colleagues saw them leave the Three Broomsticks together the previous night.

He took another look at himself in the mirror. The expression that greeted him could be defined as "well shagged". His hair was still disarrayed, his face stubbly, and his lips slightly swollen. He turned his face to the side and saw another purplish bruise on the side of his neck, quite low down near the juncture with his collar bone.

Mmmmm, oh, yes...! A slow smile spread across his face. He remembered being ordered about by a bossy woman. On the carpet. Then the couch. Stumbling through to the bedchamber. *'Put them there, lift that higher, lick this oh God, harder!'* He flexed the muscles in his back slightly with the memory, but then the smile faded. She had been very drunk.

A stab of guilt cut through the haze of recollection. *Very, very drunk.*

Bollocks.

He cleared his throat again and walked back to the bedroom door.

"Are you alright, Professor Granger?" he asked the silent darkness beyond, cursing how tentative his voice sounded. He cleared his throat again the bloody snakebite was

looked... lost.

All, that is, apart from the perfectly manicured and well-maintained oblong space, in a perfect playing card shape, before him on the lawn. The grass on this area was well kept. Meticulous white lines criss-crossed the court, and a low net stretched from one side of the space to the other.

His mother's tennis court. Draco's lip curled scornfully. His mother's obsession with such Muggle cultural degeneracy had begun here, in the very grounds of his childhood home....

"I see that you are admiring the estate, dear boy!"

Alerted by his father's shout, Draco turned from his contemplation of the alien structure and turned to watch his father weave his way towards him across the ragged lawn.

Lucius was moving in a curious motion, periodically pointing his cane to the right, then the left at the ground as he moved. Draco had the sudden impression of a slow motion dance, his father's feet moving in an elaborate pattern while the wizard's cane moved like a music hall troubadour as he progressed across the ragged lawn. Small puffs of smoke or dust erupted from the sun-baked grass wherever Lucius' cane struck the earth (it had been an unseasonably hot September in Wiltshire).

Draco frowned. *Frustrated musical theatre artiste? Early onset dementia?* he wondered as his father made another gliding turn, tapping the cane to his right this time as he approached. It reminded him absurdly of a Muggle film, which he had been forced to watch as part of his rehabilitation, in which some idiot - *what was his name?* who was famous to Muggles... Oh yes, Gene Kelly had pranced around ridiculously with a mop.

Lucius was less than ten feet away. He whirled once more, stabbing at something to the left of his feet, before bouncing the cane around in an elaborate arc and striking the ground on the right.

Draco's eyebrows crawled ever upwards. "Are you quite alright, father?"

Lucius paused, his cane poised in mid-sweep.

A moment passed. Two. Lucius regarded his son blankly.

Draco curled a lip in amusement at his father's expression. "A new exercise regime?" he suggested, waving his hands at Lucius' body language.

"Peacock shit," replied Lucius smugly, bringing his cane down on the small pile of purple droppings at his feet. *Incendio!* The pile of peacock poo disappeared in another small detonation.

"Ahhh." *Of course. Exploding peacock shit. Perfectly normal,* thought Draco. Things were clearly far worse than he had thought. *Excellent.* "Did she even take the garden-elves with her when she left?"

Lucius flicked his cane at another small deposit on the lawn, which in turn obligingly exploded into non-existence.

"Small pleasures, dear boy," he said dismissively.

Draco grunted, his eyes still fixed on the tennis court before them as his father came to stand next to him. The net sagged a fraction in the middle and moved gently in the wind that was blowing gently off the ornamental lake.

"I'm not here to discuss shit removal, father," he drawled. "I would rather discuss more... pleasant diversions."

"Your plan to return Narcissa to me from that... *Muggle.*" Lucius did not quite manage to shield the longing in his voice.

"Quite." Draco smirked. "The 'tennis coach'."

Lucius tapped his fingers impatiently on the head of his cane.

NO, you stupid boy.

Tick.

Tick. Tick.

Turner, you are incompetent. NO. No, no, no, no. no. NO.

It was nearly ten o'clock, and Severus had spent a number of unproductive hours waiting for Miss "I'll see you later, then" Granger to arrive at his chambers and convincing himself to not go up to Gryffindor Tower to find her. What did she mean by "later", anyway?

Your methodology is as stupid as your demeanour during lessons. If you had paid any attention at all to your notes in your second year, Branbury, you would know that mixing Ximphatic Aromena with a distillation of Murtlap BEFORE adding the Arrowroot would cause a toxic reaction that would kill you. Congratulations. I look forward to the practical demonstration. T.

The clock on his mantelpiece chimed mockingly. He scowled, and then he scrawled a thick red line through the next hesitant and inaccurate answer.

Utter, utter tripe, Williams. See me after the lesson.

Perhaps he should have gone to...

He shook his head sharply, furious with himself. *Don't be an idiot. She's letting you down. Disdain. Indifference. Scorn.*

Fuck it.

Back to the next manuscript.

This one was better. One of the Godfrey twins. He squinted at the top of the scroll. D'arcy. Stupid name. He grunted and read on.

Tick. Tick. Tick. *yes. Applying a counter turn every seventeen stirs would further enhance this.*

But you have already indicated that Grimbergen's hypothesis was flawed.

You need to define this term better. Look it up.

Tick. Tick tick tick tick. Acceptable, Godfrey.

He pushed the scroll across his desk into the group of marked papers.

He stared at the bottle of elf-made wine that was standing unopened on the bureau, at the two crystal glasses beside it. Up at the clock. Ten past ten. *She's not coming.* He tried to school his features into a terrifying sneer and failed.

He looked again at the bottle, then at the next essay in front of him. A cursory glance at the handwriting scrawl confirmed that it was Bensen's latest incompetent effort.

Why did I even think that this.. He clamped down on that train of thought, grinding his teeth and picking up his quill again.

A tentative knock on the door broke the silence. The knock bore all the hallmarks of a student.

Perfect. Just fucking perfect. What have the little snots done now? he thought viciously, pushing himself away from the desk, the chair legs squealing in protest on the flagstone floor.

He flung open the door to his chambers.

"What?" he barked, intent on making whomever haddared to interrupt his evening off suffer badly for their impertinence. And then he would find Nott and murder him slowly for dereliction of duty, as he was the member of staff on duty in Slytherin.

"Err. Hello."

It was Granger.

Hermione. His mind stuttered to a halt.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said a little breathlessly, her hands fluttering at her sides.

She was wearing a pretty blue dress that was far too lightweight for the dungeons. Goosebumps were already showing on her upper arms. Her hair had been pulled back from her face and neck, and she was smiling and squinting up at him rather anxiously.

Her eyes flicked to his hand on the doorjamb. "Oh." Her face fell. "I'm sorry, are you busy? I thought..."

Severus followed her eyes and saw that the red ink from the quill he was holding was running down his wrist, staining the cuff of his best white shirt.

"I'll just..." she began, taking a step backwards.

The scuff of her heel on the floor was finally enough to galvanise his mind into some sort of action.

"No!" his voice was too loud in the corridor. She paused, uncertain, her eyebrows raised in surprise. He cleared his throat and tried to smooth his tone. "Please come in, Professor." He forced his face into a smile (hoping to Merlin that it was a *smile* and not some sort of hideous grimace) and gestured that she should come forward to follow him inside his rooms.

Hermione stepped closer to him, but before he could move backwards, she caught hold of his arm and pulled him a little towards her. Startled, he bent forward, conscious that he was halfway out of his rooms and into the corridor and that anyone who was walking past could come upon them and think...

"*Hermione, Severus,*" she whispered in his ear and kissed his cheek. "Boyfriend's privilege."

She moved quietly past him into his chambers.

He shut the door. *Boyfriend?* he thought, horrified.

A

A/N: With grateful thanks to beaweasley2, Clairvoyant and nagandsev always.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 13

Porridge, Post and Prejudice....

Chapter 4: Porridge, Post and Prejudice....

"Good morning, Professor Snape." Theodore Nott's voice was carefully bland, his face deliberately expressionless. Snape hesitated for just a fraction of a second before pulling his chair back from the High Table and carefully sitting down. Rather than arrive together for the second morning in a row, Hermione was deliberately taking the circular route to the Great Hall so as to deflect attention. She had also checked his neck for love bites. And had insisted that he wash his hair that morning in the shower with her.

A sudden vision of her, pressed up against the cold tiles in his bathroom, breathless and laughing at the shock of cold against her back as his fingers chased the rivulets of water over her breasts while her hands...

"Did you enjoy your evening off, sir?" Nott asked, passing the coffee pot across to his Head of House.

Slamming up his Occlumency shields with a force that he hadn't used in years, Snape shot him *dook*, but Nott's face showed nothing but polite interest.

"I marked fifth-year essays, then went to bed," he said shortly. It was the truth after all... barring the two hours or so of enthusiastic (and *acrobatic* he was sure that he had tweaked an abductor muscle) love making that had left both parties sweaty and glorious in the aftermath.

Nott smiled.

Snape sneered.

Nott passed the sugar. "Will Professor Granger be joining us for breakfast this morning?" he asked nonchalantly, spearing a mushroom and popping it into his mouth.

Severus' eyes narrowed. *Cheeky little bastard.* "I have absolutely no idea," he replied smoothly. "Professor Granger's whereabouts are absolutely none of my concern."

"Oh, have you seen Hermione then this morning, Severus?" the Headmistress called from a few places away, breaking off from her conversation with Flitwick to hail him. "I wanted to let her know that the new Arithmancy texts she ordered have been delivered this morning...."

He could feel heat rising slowly up his neck and clamped down hard on the flush that was threatening to appear. He cleared his throat. "I was just informing Professor Nott that I am currently unaware of Professor Granger's location," he bit out.

"It's not like her to miss breakfast," muttered Sprout in what Severus thought a suspiciously lewd undertone.

Whatever response he might have attempted to that remark was lost in a cheery, "Good morning!" as the professor in question bustled into the Hall behind them, pulled out the chair next to Severus and sat down. "Good morning everyone! Are those pancakes? Wonderful!" She turned to look at him, and her smile was bright and thrilling. "Could you pass the coffee please, Severus?"

Snape fought the temptation to roll his eyes and groan. *Gryffindors.* She might as well have made an announcement to the whole bloody Hall. Both Minerva and Pomona were sporting appalling smirks, and Nott was practically snorting into his porridge.

Snape prepared himself to deliver a withering comment, but before he could speak, the daily post-owl delivery began, and the level of noise in the Hall increased exponentially.

Severus usually did not pay much attention to the morning post. He rarely received correspondence, and if he did, he was sure to make use of his own owl (a discrete black banded species with above average intelligence) in order to avoid such a vulgar, public display. He regarded the scene below with distaste.

True enough, the adolescent hoard was now shouting out in horror, delight, or surprise at messages and parcels from home and making *far* more noise than was necessary. The whole irritating process usually lasted for some minutes. He pressed his lips together in irritation and returned his attention to the coffee in his hands.

Hermione's nudge under the table caused him to look up.

A huge grey owl was approaching the High Table, flying unerringly straight towards him. Snape's eyebrows rose in surprise as the bird wheeled about and dropped two identical envelopes on the dark oak table in front of him and Hermione.

The envelopes were unmistakable. He felt Hermione tense beside him just as the conversation around them dropped.

"Is that the *Malfoy* crest?" the new Charms teacher (whose name Severus had not yet bothered to learn) asked.

"*Interesting...*" Nott commented under his breath, his eyes dancing with barely suppressed mirth.

Severus pocketed his envelope with immediate aplomb and shoed the owl away with a murderous flick of his wand hand. Hermione was still looking at hers as if it were about to explode.

"Aren't you going to open it, dear?" Sprout asked loudly, thus ensuring every single staff member's attention was riveted on both of them.

Cursing his fate and nosey Herbology teachers everywhere, Severus watched Hermione slowly slit open the envelope with her thumb and withdraw its contents. Aside from an effusively decorated invitation card, with her name in Lucius' perfect, flowing script, was a strange-looking purple and green ticket.

Hermione stared at the ticket for a few moments, her expressive face alive with a series of emotions that ranged from distaste to incredulity.

"Severus...," she asked into the pregnant silence that had fallen on the staff table. "Why has Lucius Malfoy sent me a ticket for *Wimbledon*?"

Hermione sat perched on the edge of her sofa, holding the Malfoy invitation by her fingertips.

It was a trick.

Clearly it was a trick.

What was the smooth bastard up to?

She re-read the letter once more.

Dear Professor Granger,

I write to enclose an invitation for you and a companion of your choice to this year's annual Champions' Ball at Wimbledon. I would be delighted to accompany you both, should you wish to accept my humble invitation. In the long months since the end of the Second War, I am sure you are aware that my family and I have been thoroughly rehabilitated and we are embracing Muggle culture with open arms and an earnest desire to right the wrongs of the past.

In the spirit of reconciliation, I hope you are prepared to put old prejudices and judgements aside and join Draco and myself for this sparkling event.

Yours cordially,

Lucius Malfoy

The old scar on her arm itched, and she flicked a look at it.

MUDBLOOD

Done to her at Malfoy Manor seven years' ago while Lucius and Draco had looked on and Narcissa had held her sister's cloak.

"In the spirit of reconciliation."

"Old prejudices and judgements."

The clanking and banging of the ancient plumbing system in her en-suite bathroom heralded the arrival of her... What should she call him? *Boyfriend* was out he had made that abundantly clear.

The ferocious look Snape was wearing as he stalked into her living room pushed that thought to one side.

"What's wrong?" she asked, half-rising from her seat.

"Your deranged towel rail just tried to assault me," he muttered, rolling his shirt sleeves down his forearms.

Hermione pulled a sympathetic face. "Ahhh... sorry about that. It's rather pushy. Doesn't like to see anyone leave without thoroughly drying their hands."

"I prefer a charm," Severus bit out a trifle sulkily. He looked at the letter in her hands. "Will you accept his invitation?"

"Will you accept yours?" she retorted smartly.

"Of course," he replied. "It would be considered very rude if I didn't."

Hermione bit back the obvious response and turned her attention back to the letter in her hands. "What is he up to?" she asked, frowning at the flowing script and careful words. "And why bloody *Wimbledon*, for goodness sakes?"

Severus sat down beside her so that his thigh was pressed against hers. He leaned further against her to read the letter, and then he shrugged. "Perhaps you should simply take his letter on face value," he suggested, running a light finger along her right hand and up her forearm. She shivered slightly at the teasing touch. "He is keen to make amends. There is a lot to be said for changing your point of view about a person, after all," he murmured, dragging his fingers carefully across the open v-neck of her teaching robes.

Carefully, he kissed her jawline and lipped his way under her ear and along her throat while gently plucking the card with Lucius' invitation out of her numb hands. She felt him follow her as she sank backwards onto the cushions, her mind whirling and her body reacting to his tender, if rather clumsy, caresses.

"So who are you going to invite to go with you?" he whispered into her shoulder, sending delicious tendrils of want skittering across her sensitised flesh.

"Mmmmm," Hermione moaned. "You of course...."

Snape snickered, kissing her again. "Don't be ridiculous. We can't possibly go together...."

Hermione stilled beneath him.

It was bad enough she had to pretend that there was nothing between them at school (she supposed she could understand that it might place both of them in a potentially difficult situation with staff and students alike), but not to acknowledge her in an entirely non-wizarding environment... in front of *Malfoy* of all people.

"Why not?" she asked in a forcibly reasonable tone, still unmoving beneath him.

"Well, that would be tantamount to..." He licked her throat again, nuzzling her neck.

"*Tantamount to...*?" she asked in a tone that would have immediately warned a less distracted partner that he was entering dark waters.

"And who will *you* be taking?"

She felt him shrug. "I thought Nott might be amused by..."

"*NOTT?*"

She could not control the stinging surge of magic which threw him off her and dumped him on the floor in an affronted tangle of limbs.

Two short minutes later, Snape was storming down the staircase from the Gryffindor Tower.

Even Peeves kept his head down.

A

A/N: Oh, dear....

I am pleased to say that beaweasley2, Clairvoyant and nagandsev are helping me to get the next installment to you in a week's time. They are wonderful - and so is JKR, the original creator of this universe.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 13

Tea and Sympathy....

Chapter 5: Tea and Sympathy.

"I just don't understand why he suddenly wants to entertain me. At bloody *Wimbledon*, of all places!"

Grimmauld Place kitchen was a far cheerier place now that the Potters had moved in full time. Bright sunlight slanted through the large windows, reflecting off the shiny surfaces of the new kitchen units. Hermione was sitting at the large oak table in the centre of the room, cradling a cup of Earl Grey while Ginny balanced baby Lily on her knees.

"But what the hell is he up to, Ginny?" Hermione asked again.

"Which one?" Ginny answered. "The sneaky git whose invited you to watch a Muggle game and then go to a posh party? Or the sneaky git who decided to take Theodore Nott, *rather than you* to the previously mentioned sneaky git's Muggle game and posh party?"

"Ha bloody ha. Malfoy, of course." Hermione had another hour to go before she was due back at Hogwarts, and her nerves were beginning to fray.

Ginny shrugged and frowned. "No idea. Have you asked Ron about it?"

Hermione could feel her face flaming. "No, and I don't want you to mention it to him, Gin. Ron always had a problem with Malfoy, and, Auror or not, I can't trust him to be objective."

And he would want to take over. And bring up the past. She could feel her eyes begin to prickle, and the scar on her arm itched. She shouldn't go. This was ridiculous.

"I can imagine. Sorry." Ginny cut a slice of cake and pushed it over to Hermione, her expression warm and slightly pitying.

Hermione blinked furiously and took another sip of her tea, welcoming the sharp tang of the liquid on her tongue.

"Eat," Ginny ordered before cutting another slice for herself. Lily grabbed at it, and Ginny broke off a small piece for her to taste. The baby cooed and giggled as she stuffed it into her mouth.

"So...," Ginny said. "Professor Snape, then?" She slurped some more of her tea, keeping the hot mug carefully away from Lily while the baby reached for more cake.

Hermione shot her friend a nervous look and shrugged a little, a thin smile curving her lips. Her throat was tight, so she drank another sip of tea to try to ease it. How on earth could she possibly explain? "Gin, I... had no idea he had such an extraordinary... that he is..." *Impossible? Frustrating? Witty? Amusing? Amazingly tender and responsive in bed?* "... not Ronald," she finished helplessly.

Ginny rolled her eyes, but she smiled as she helped Lily to grab another handful of fruitcake. "Hermione... You know that I understand why you and Ron split up, even if Harry still can't get his head around it. He was *never* going to be able to keep up with you, and you were *never* going to accept... well... this." She jiggled Lily again on her knee by way of illustration.

Hermione shifted in her seat. A sudden image of a red-faced Ron sitting at the very same table that they were at now flashed before her eyes, his face twisted and ugly in vibrant hurt and recrimination. The echo of his anger was suddenly very loud in the cosy, brightly lit kitchen.

Then she saw a vision of Severus, his face clouded by something similar as she'd dumped him off her sofa onto the rug in her sitting room.

She fought to return to the reason for her visit. "Ginny, has Harry said anything to you about the Malfoys?" she asked abruptly.

"Not since Malfoy senior passed his rehabilitation order." Ginny frowned. "I thought the Malfoys were a faded force. Assets stripped. Out of the limelight."

Lily began fussing on her knee, and Ginny shushed her with a baby cup of juice. For a few moments, all that could be heard in the kitchen was the determined sucking noise the baby made. Hermione looked hard at the little girl, safe and protected in her mother's arms.

Almost the same age as Harry had been when Voldemort murdered his parents and left him an orphan.

"I think Malfoy's up to something," she said, lifting her chin defiantly. "And I'm going to find out what."

Ginny narrowed her eyes. "Do you think it's just Lucius?" she asked. "I heard Draco was released a few weeks ago from his work placement."

Hermione looked at her friend blankly, and Ginny laughed a short, sharp sound. "Don't you read the *Prophet* any more? *Accio* last month's *Prophet*!"

Hermione stared at the front page. Draco Malfoy's sneering face stared out at her with unconcealed distaste.

'*Draco Malfoy Rehabilitated!* the headline read. *Malfoy Scion Rejoins Society!* She skimmed the leading article.

"But what about Wimbledon?" Hermione asked. "Why on earth invite me to a tennis tournament, of all places?"

Ginny shrugged. "Public place. Lots of Muggles." She waggled her eyebrows. "He's probably counting on you thinking you were safe there...?"

Hermione pulled a face.

"What is *tennis* all about anyway?" Ginny added, expertly flicking her wand to conjure a thin stream of brightly coloured bubbles for the baby. Lily cooed in delight, waving her fat little hands at the translucent spheres.

"Two players use a racket, erm... like a wooden... pan-shaped thing," she spread her hands, "about this long, to hit a small soft ball at each other over a net."

"Small like a snitch small?" Ginny flicked her wand again, and more magical bubbles erupted from its tip.

Hermione shook her head. "Like an apple. Or an orange, I suppose."

"Oh." Ginny sounded unimpressed. "Sounds like fun."

"It's very popular," Hermione countered. "Tickets for these big tournament finals sell out as fast as the Quidditch World Cup. I'm not going to *enjoy* it, Ginny. I'm going to see what Malfoy wants from me." She rubbed her forearm distractedly.

"*Mmmhmmm.*" Ginny carefully levitated the tea pot to refill Hermione's empty cup. "Have you spoken to Sn...Severus since you threw him out of your rooms?"

Hermione shook her head. "He's avoiding me. Keeps playing musical chairs at High Table and hiding behind his newspaper in the staff room." Her tea cup rattled in its saucer. "I should apologise."

"Bollocks to that!" Ginny cut in staunchly. "From what you told me about it, *he* should be the one apologising to *you!*"

Hermione felt the tears returning to her eyes. She took a deep, shaky breath and smiled bravely across the table at her friend. "Maybe it was just a stupid mistake after all," she said. "If he wasn't prepared to be seen out with me..."

She recalled the flash of hurt in his eyes as he had scrambled to his feet.

"Sod him, then," Ginny pronounced with the assurance of the happily married before leaning over towards Hermione. "Plenty more fish in the sea. So, *where* you taking with you?"

Hermione sighed. "Theodore Nott."

"I thought *Snape* was taking Nott!" Ginny sat backwards in surprise.

There was a short, embarrassed pause. "As soon as Severus left the room, I Floo-called Theodore and invited him before Severus could."

"That's slightly sad, sweetie." Ginny's tone was sardonically sympathetic.

Hermione's head landed with a *thunk* on the table. "I know," she said, her voice slightly muffled.

"Funny, though," Ginny added, smirking. "Pity you can't get any tickets for love nor money. I'd pay quite a bit to see Snape's reaction to your date."

"It's not a date," Hermione mumbled, head still on the table. When had her life become so ridiculous? "I am never going on a date again. And certainly never with another bloody Slytherin."

Ginny snorted in disbelief. "Have you told Nott that?" she asked.

The singing had begun. *Again*.

Narcissa Black Malfoy scraped her fingertips across the fine silken sheets and wondered if there was a charm or a jinx that could safely induce temporary mutism.

The voice from the bathroom rose in both volume and wailing atonality.

She toyed with Langlock not particularly appealing, as it could cause the target to choke to death. Perhaps a variant of Obliviate? If the subject could not remember *how* to sing... Would that stop the appalling noise?

The sound of the hotel's shower was now almost entirely drowned out by the tuneless bellowing.

She tapped her wand (newly transfigured to resemble a fine-nibbed ink pen) on her fingers.

A thought struck her. If she turned the water to icy cold, perhaps...?

Abruptly, the ghastly caterwauling ceased, replaced by a gratifyingly high-pitched shriek and a frantic scrabbling of limbs.

And she relaxed back onto the cool pillows behind her.

"Are you alright, darling?" she called, pitching her voice somewhere near to dutiful concern.

His muffled response was inaudible, thank Circe. She wondered how long it would take him to work out that the hot water was no longer flowing. From the sound of the swearing and fumbling in the adjoining chamber, it was going to take some time.

She sighed again, her eyes wandering about the beautifully appointed hotel suite.

The sex was diverting... But the intellect was distinctly mediocre. She wondered if all Muggle sportsmen were so...*limited*.

What to do, what to do...

A sudden and impatient scratching at the great sash window to her left caused her to jump slightly.

Narcissa recognised one of the Malfoy's grey post-owls silhouetted against the window in the bright morning sunshine. It was tapping at the glass with an arrogance that reminded her of its master. She wondered what Lucius was up to... And a delicious thrill coursed through her at that thought.

She flicked her wand to admit the post-owl.

Carefully, she opened the letter it proffered, her eyebrows rising in surprise as she began to read Draco's carefully worded missive.

"What the *FUCK*?"

Her lover stood in the doorway, eyes popping in horror as he stared at her.

Narcissa looked back at him in surprise for his uncouth outburst until she realised that the post-owl was sitting perched on the elaborate golden bedside lamp.

There was a short, charged silence.

"Yes, darling?" she asked nonchalantly, turning the letter over in her hands. Really... Draco's handwriting had deteriorated quite dreadfully.

"There's... there's a fucking OWL in the room!" her lover stuttered, holding on to the towel about his hips with one hand and pointing stupidly at the bird by her side. "What the *fuck*..."

"Do watch your language, darling," she rebuked him calmly, finishing the letter and fingering the two green and purple tickets that had accompanied it. Her lips curled slightly.

"But... but... It's just sitting there...!"

Narcissa rolled her eyes in some irritation. "Well, of course it's just sitting there, you foolish man. It's waiting to be ~~paid~~ paid."

He made to speak again, but her wand flicked and there was silence in the room.

Narcissa allowed her gaze to travel from his perfectly formed chest, across the tight nipples and deliciously toned abdomen, to his slack jaw and glassy-eyed expression. *So, so stupid*, she thought. *Pity*.

Her attention returned to the letter and the tickets in her hand, and she smiled.

Clever boy, she thought.

A

A/N: beaweasley2, Clairvoyant and nagandsev are magic. So is JKR.

The next chapter of this tale will be up in a couple of weeks in which we will see the plot thickening....

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 13

Temporal maneuvers in the dark....

Chapter 6: Temporal maneuvers in the dark

"... And would you, Severus Tobias Snape, swear to the fact that Draco Abraxus Malfoy was coerced in his actions and, therefore, that he was ~~not~~ a willing follower of Tom Marvolo Riddle?" The Assistant Interrogator is a young man, not much older than Draco. His accent is a rich French burr.

Beauxbatons, Severus thinks. Not one of mine. It seems that the Ministry is anxious to avoid any accusations of bias in these trials.

His stomach roils sourly as he remembers Shackelbolt's sanctimonious speech at the start of the morning's work. His neck itches, the newly formed skin of his scar sensitive and raw against the stiff collar of his robes.

Around him sit the full Wizengamot, arrayed in all their purple finery, desperate to prove the wicked to be wicked and exonerate themselves from blame. Severus notes that there are a few gaps in the ranks before him, and his lip curls. The Umbridge woman is nowhere to be seen.

He looks down from the witness box at Draco sitting tall and proud in the accused's chair, the paleness of his face and hair a white flare on the black wood behind him.

"Malfoy is but a boy," he begins carefully. "His parents were at the beck and call of the Dark Lord..."

"Do not refer to the Dark Wizard Riddle by that name!" The Interrogator's voice is shrill.

Snape inclines his head towards him, striving to keep mockery from his body language. He suddenly remembers Albus' insistence that fear of a name begets fear of the thing itself and feels oddly comforted by the truism. "As you wish," he says.

The Interrogator subsides, waiting for Snape to speak.

"His parents were at the command of," a bare hesitation, "Riddle." Severus straightens. "There was little that the boy could have done to resist."

"You say 'boy', Snape," the Chief Interrogator cuts in suddenly, his tone reasonable but sharp. "But by his own account, Draco Malfoy was all but seventeen an adult in our world and a willing supporter. Just like you were during the First War."

Snape fights to retain his composure. This is the wizard that Snape remembers from his trial after the First War, the one with keen eyes and quick wits. The one for whom Dumbledore's testimony alone prevented his conviction.

But Dumbledore is not here now, and this is a wizard he is afraid of.

"How old was Malfoy when he took the Mark?" the Chief Interrogator asks again, and there is the faint echo of Imperio in his voice.

Snape risks a glance at Draco, who ignores him, his expression shuttered and face pale.

"How old was he?" the Inquisitor presses, the spittle on his lips glinting in the low light of the chamber's sconces. "As old as you were when **you** were Marked, Snape? Did he beg for it as you did when you were his age?" The wizard turns to address the Wizengamot with a flourish of his robes. "You see, my fellow members, the age of a recruit must be measured against his... passion... for the cause."

He snaps back around towards Snape. "**Did** Draco Malfoy beg to be a Death Eater?" he barks, insistent and predatory.

Snape remains silent, trying to calculate the odds of his own survival if he tells the truth. It is a quick calculation.

He speaks.

Draco does not move, but his eyes flick for a second to meet Snape's. Severus is shocked by the rage he sees burning within them.

The Wizengamot takes less than twenty minutes to send Draco Malfoy to Azkaban.

Snape's body twisted on the bed, hands grasping at blankets, legs writhing beneath the rough cotton sheets. A pause in the motion, and then he relaxed, falling into a deeper slumber.

A purple and green ticket rested beside an empty vial of Sleeping Draught on the bedside table, his name inscribed upon it in Lucius' insouciant scrawl.

"Shouldn't we *both* be wearing white?" Theodore Nott's voice was amused as he looked Hermione up and down in the Entrance Hall of the castle. He was wearing a pale suit of ivory linen, the blazer jacket edged in green. His shirt was open at the neck, and a straw boater perched jauntily on his head. Under her gaze, he performed a slow pirouette on perfectly shined shoes and held his hands out at his sides for her approval.

She laughed at him despite her nerves. "The *players* have to wear white at Wimbledon, not the spectators, Theodore; I'm perfectly happy in this, thank you." Her own dress was a deep blue and quite long. She had shrunk her ball gown and high heels into a tiny package in her purse for later on. They rested there alongside her wand, the tickets, and a small canister of Weasley's Stinging Spray that Ginny had insisted she take with her.

He sniffed, putting on an air of hurt pride. "Well, I like to dress to impress. Those school robes can be so *gloomy*. If a wizard can't put on a bit of a show, well then..."

She laughed and stopped him with a hand on his arm. "You look very dashing, Theodore," she reassured him. Why did wizards find it so difficult to dress appropriately for the Muggle world?

"You don't look too bad yourself," he returned, recovering a modicum of his earlier swagger, "for a foolhardy Gryffindor."

She blushed at his obvious flirtation and blew a raspberry at him, curiously buoyed up by his irreverent presence. "I've got the tickets. Come on, let's go."

"Aren't we waiting for Professor Snape?" Nott asked innocently, tipping the boater to the back of his head so it sat at an even more rakish angle.

Hermione's lips set firmly together. "No," she answered shortly, remembering her recent attempt at communication with Severus. It had been rather one sided. Frustrated by his recent intransigence and his refusal to discuss their stupid spat in her chambers, she had gone to his rooms that morning to try to sort out the situation. She had shouted through the locked door to his chamber, but he had made no response, and she had given up after a few humiliating minutes.

Nonetheless, she couldn't stop her eyes from drifting in the direction of the dungeons. There would have been something comforting about his presence beside her as she faced Malfoy.

"I don't think he's coming after all," she said after a moment and turned back to face her companion.

She saw Nott's face flicker with some sort of complicated emotion at her news, but he made no comment, and his easy smile quickly returned to his lips.

"Very well, then," he said, sweeping his arm before her. "Onwards to Muggle London!"

Hermione took a deep breath, telling herself to focus on what she was doing. She had to find out what Lucius Malfoy was up to if she was going to put the past fully behind her.

She was *late*.

Severus fumed quietly as he waited in the Entrance Hall, casting the Tempus Charm for an unnecessary fifth time in as many minutes.

His shoulders felt tight under his unfamiliar Muggle clothing, and he flexed his fingers around his wand, trying to prevent them from scratching at his neck.

Why had he taken the sleeping potion? Silently, he chastised himself once again, but the bloody woman had him so upset that he had been unable to sleep properly for days. The blissful oblivion of one night's sleep before the trial of meeting Lucius for the first time in years had seemed so enticing....

He flicked his wand again, scowling at the numbers it revealed until they faded into nothingness.

He tried to remember the dream that had wakened him in the middle of the night, despite the deadening effects of the draught. He had a lingering sense of unease in his mind about it, as if it had contained some larger meaning for him.... But like an insubstantial zephyr, the memory of it slipped away from him as he tried to grasp hold.

He tapped his foot on the flagstones and cast the spell again. She was nearly twenty minutes late. They certainly needed to leave now if they were going to reach their destination by the time on the ticket.

At least he had not invited Nott after all. That little shit had taken to grinning smugly at him in the staffroom as if he knew the punchline to a riddle that Severus had not even told. It had taken him a few days to recover from the humiliation of Hermione's reaction to the idea that he had not intended to invite her to accompany him to Wimbledon long enough to realise that he may have misinterpreted her initial reluctance to allow their... association to be more widely known.

He had thought to speak with her about it, to say something.... But they seemed to be forever surrounded by people in this bloody castle. He had considered going up to her rooms, but he was damned if he were going to wait outside *another* woman's door, begging for forgiveness. He would apologise in a calm and dignified fashion when she arrived to meet him, and they would progress from there.

He kicked his boot at the floor once again. *Whenever she gets here, that is.* They shouldn't be late. Lucius would be insufferable about the cause. Perhaps he should go to her rooms after all. He cast Tempus again and hissed in frustration.

When it came to Hermione, he seemed to find it hard to keep his thoughts in a coherent order.

"Good morning, Severus!" Pomona Sprout's gratingly cheerful call jarred him out of his thinking. The Herbology professor bustled across the hallway, wrestling some sort of tentacled vegetation under her arm.

"I'm just moving this Tarantula Daisy from Minerva's office. He's getting a bit too big for his boots, aren't you, deary?" The plant waved a vicious spiked prong in response, which she effortlessly caught and pinned to her side with the ease of much practice. She leaned forwards conspiratorially. "Tried to throttle a First Year yesterday, poor thing," she whispered. Snape wasn't sure if she meant the plant or the student.

Sprout looked Severus up and down appreciatively. "You look very dapper, dear. Why haven't you left yet?"

How was it that Sprout always knew everybody's business? "I am waiting for Professor Granger," he bit out eventually. "She's late."

Sprout sniggered and shook her head. "I'm afraid you've missed them, Severus. Hermione left about an hour ago with Theodore. I'm told that she did try to wake you up...."

"*Th...*?" he blurted, then clamped his lips shut before forcing them into a smile and bidding her good day.

He could still hear the bloody woman chortling behind him as he stormed down the steps of the castle towards the Apparition point.

A/N: I'm sorry for the delay in posting this chapter. All praises are due to beawesley2, Clairvoyant and nagandsev.

Still don't own 'em - no money made!

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 13

Insufficient Balls to Be Truly Diverting....

Chapter 7: Insufficient Balls to Be Truly Diverting.

Snape emerged from the bushes, mustering as much dignity as a wizard could when covered in privet.

It was hot and he was irritable.

Nott! Of all the infernal bloody cheek of the man! Bloody interloper, with his bloody grinning I-know-something-you-don't-know expression. Little shit.

The journey from Hogwarts to this infernal place had been short and stressful. Having Apparated to London, Severus had consulted a map of the capital to determine the exact location of the All England Lawn Tennis Club, where the Wimbledon Championships were being held, and another one of the site itself to select the safest place to Apparate to.

The photographs of Aorangi Park, on the far eastern side of the tennis club, had been the most accurate point of reference he could find, but they had not provided for the wall-to-wall picnicking families or the two slack-jawed adolescents wearing replica sporting kit, trying to find somewhere for a surreptitious snog that he encountered on his arrival.

In short, he had been forced to Re-Apparate very quickly into a bush.

He brushed errant leaves off his sleeves as he spun around slowly, taking in his surroundings.

No one appeared to take any notice of him. *Muggles*.

Discreetly, he fingered his wand in the pocket of the Muggle trench coat he was wearing and muttered, "Point me to Hermione Granger."

The wand twitched firmly in his fingers, and Snape began to stalk with the single-minded determination of the truly *wronged* towards the huge buildings dominating the tennis club.

"Professor Granger," Lucius Malfoy purred. "It is simply delightful to see you again."

The Members' Enclosure was an extraordinary sight. Hundreds of wooden tables with ivory parasols were crammed together on a patch of grass to the side of the impressive Competitors' Complex in front of the giant Centre Court building. Underneath the dappled shade they provided, hosts of Muggles sat about in identical wooden folding chairs, eating, drinking, and talking loudly. Hermione was glad that she had taken some care with her own appearance, as all the women that she could see were dripping with expensive-looking jewellery and the men were sporting garish blazers and very costly watches.

And standing in front of her, his neat frame dressed in a well tailored suit, his hair tied back from his face, and his expression polite and solicitous, stood Lucius Malfoy.

He seemed smaller than she remembered from the trials.

She forced her face into a smile.

He made a small bow, and she noticed that the cane in his hand was the same one he had carried before the War.

"Mister Malfoy," Hermione offered her hand, willing it to stay firm and not shake, "thank you for your invitation."

He took her hand, and her mind was suddenly crowded by questions. *What the hell are you up to? Why do you want to speak to me suddenly after seven years? What do you want...?*

"I am so pleased you were able to come," he interrupted her jumbled thoughts smoothly, his cool fingers encircling her own.

There was a slight pause, and he dropped his hand, waving to a passing sommelier for some drinks to be brought over.

"I did not realise that you followed Muggle sport," Hermione managed to say.

Lucius smiled and turned slightly so that her attention was drawn to the small dark blue club membership badge on his lapel. Hermione's eyebrows raised. She had researched the Championships thoroughly, and she knew how impossible it was to become a member of the All England Lawn Tennis Club. He was either fabulously well connected or obscenely rich.

A sudden memory from her conversation with Ginny rang in her head. *"I thought the Malfoys were a faded force. Assets stripped. Out of the limelight..."*

She stared at him. *Assets stripped...*

"Oh... I do enjoy games, Professor," he smiled. "I have certainly learned to fully appreciate Muggle sport in recent... times."

He leaned forward. "Thanks to my rehabilitation, I have also learned to appreciate much, *much* more about Muggle life," he added, and his eyes appeared to flash with some other meaning.

Beside her, she heard Nott snort very quietly.

She rallied. "I think you know Professor Nott, Mister Malfoy."

Lucius turned to her companion, and his eyebrow rose slightly. Hermione had the sudden, odd feeling that Lucius Malfoy was unsettled by Nott's presence. She made a mental note to ask Theodore about it later.

In the meantime, Lucius appeared to have recovered. "Your pardon, *Professor* Nott," he purred. "I was under the impression that Professor Snape would be accompanying Professor Granger today. But it appears that my son was clearly *misinformed*."

"It is good to meet you after all this time, Mister Malfoy." Theodore bowed his head a little in return. "I will endeavor to fill Severus' shoes, so to speak... in *all* matters."

There was an awkward pause, no more than a beat... but Hermione heard it.

"You knew my son Draco, I believe?" Lucius asked eventually.

"Somewhat, sir," she heard Nott answer carefully. "I was with Draco in House. I do hope he will be here today...?"

"Indeed. Just so, just so." Lucius twirled his cane between the fingers of his right hand.

Hermione looked between the two men, sensing that something was not quite as it should have been.

But Nott continued to grin his easy grin and looked about the fine enclosure. His eyes lingered on a particularly garishly dressed lady. "And how is Mrs Malfoy?" he asked after a few moments. "I trust that she is well?"

A broad smile appeared again on their host's face. Or rather, Hermione thought, Lucius Malfoy just bared his teeth.

"She is well, I thank you, Mister Nott." Lucius replied. "She will be joining us later."

"Indeed," Nott nodded once more and took another sip from his glass.

Lucius turned his attention back to Hermione. "May I offer you a drink, Professor Granger?" he asked politely.

Having negotiated the strange, grassy hill bedecked by patriotic bunting and covered in excited Muggles all of whom, for some reason, seemed perfectly, rowdily, content to sit in front of a giant television screen for their entertainment Severus continued along a series of pathways towards Centre Court.

The sun beat down, making his neck itch, and he shucked his Muggle rain coat, being careful to keep his wand hidden beneath it as he continued to make his way, following the urgent pull of his wand.

He wondered for the umpteenth time what Lucius was up to, inviting them both to this ridiculous event. Beneath that speculation, he knew, even after all these years, lay the dark, uncomfortable, and familiar prickle of guilt.

He could have done more for Draco. He *should* have done more for him.

He remembered the look of resignation on the face of Malfoy senior as his son had been committed to prison. Lucius understood, of course, that Severus was only doing what he could to save his own neck. As Lucius had put it on the one occasion that Severus had visited his old associate during his confinement, defending the sons of proven Death Eaters was not a way to an Order of Merlin, First Class, after all *old boy*.

It had been the last time the two of them had spoken in seven years.

Snape scowled at that memory as he pounded along the immaculately manicured walkway towards the centre of the tennis club complex, dodging championship goers and focusing on the sensations from the wand in his hand.

He was getting closer to her he could feel it.

He was worried about Hermione. He thought back to Nott's supercilious grin over dinner the previous evening. It made him feel positively ancient to think in those terms, but he was concerned about the young man's intentions towards her.

*And more concerned that you have fucked things up again for yourself*his conscience goaded him.

He dismissed the traitorous thought with a growl while turning smartly around the corner of a large brick building and cannoned straight into someone.

"Look who I found skulking around the Centre Court, Father!"

Hermione spun slowly on her heels to see Draco Malfoy approaching, pushing through the crowds of champagne drinkers in the Members' Enclosure. She was surprised to see him looking so well, given the picture of him that she had seen in Ginny's newspaper. Behind him, wearing a scowl so thunderous it could have boasted its own weather system, stood Severus Snape, tall and slender in a black linen suit.

Beside her, she heard Nott make a small, breathy sound like a cough.

"Hello, Theodore." Draco's pale eyes flicked between the two of them. His face was flushed.

"Hello, Draco," Nott returned smoothly, lifting his newly acquired champagne flute to his lips. "Professor," he added to Severus with admirable calm.

Severus ignored him, reserving his whole attention for Hermione.

"I thought you weren't coming!" she blurted.

"I thought you were going alone," Snape rejoined, eyes snapping. "But I see that *Professor Nott* has stepped into the breach."

"Look, I..." Hermione began hotly.

"Now, Severus," Draco placed his hand on Severus' arm, and to her utter astonishment, Hermione saw Snape shudder slightly under his touch and quieten, although his eyes still seemed to glitter darkly in the bright afternoon sunlight.

Lucius coughed discretely and looked at his expensive watch. He clucked his tongue.

"I do believe it is time for us to take our seats, lady and gentlemen," he announced. He flicked his eyes towards his son. "I imagine that mama will already be in the box...?" he enquired.

Draco smiled. "Naturally, Father."

"Mrs Malfoy is *such* a tennis fan, Hermione," Nott added.

"Just so, just so, dear boy," Lucius smiled through gritted teeth.

He offered Hermione his arm. "Shall we go, my dear?"

Automatically, she offered her hand in response, and he captured it quickly and smoothly, wrapping her fingers about his forearm.

Lucius squeezed her hand between his arm and his chest. "I'm sure that you will enjoy the game," he whispered to her, his breath hot on her cheek and his fingers pressing into the back of her hand. "I suppose the *purist* would say that there are insufficient balls in play for it to be truly diverting, but nonetheless..."

With one final look at Severus, who was still staring silently back at her with that curiously burning expression in his eyes, she was swept along at Lucius' side towards Centre Court.

A

A/N: Grateful thanks as always to the incomparable beaweasley2, Clairvoyant and nagandsev.

I still don't own these characters - Jo Rowling does.

Happy Halloween, everyone... although I'm not sure that Severus would agree, of course.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 13

Insufficient Balls from Another Perspective....

Chapter 8: Insufficient Balls from Another Perspective....

What the fuck is happening?

I can't move. Wait. Blink. I can blink. I'm breathing. A selective paralysis, then.

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

"You're reactions have slowed, Severus. Too many distractions, perhaps?"

Focus. Find the danger. Use your head.

I'm lying down. I'm on the ground and someone is looking down.... Damned eyes won't focus! Blond. Male.

Is that... Draco? I thought he was...?

"Stand up, Severus."

Skin crawling. He's touching me.

Imperious?

No. What, then? He's speaking... pulling me to my feet.

"Listen to me, old man," he whispers. I can feel Draco's power sliding through me, under my skin... and a metallic taste at the back of my throat. Is it poison? My heart begins to thunder; from fear or whatever it is that he has done to me, I am not sure.

"Don't even think you can fight this," he continues. "I've had years to perfect it. The foolproof compulsion drug – foolproof because it is nothing the wizarding world has ever seen before. You can't brew a cure because nothing in nature will allow you to. You can't speak or move unless I allow it. I can let you come to your senses and pull you back under – do you understand? You are mine now, just as you should have been years ago.

"And the best thing is..." He slides his fingers up my forearm, running the tips over the sensitive skin there. Even so many years later, I cannot bear to touch the Mark without pain. I cannot move of course, but I recoil involuntarily, my insides churning, trying to move... trying to think.

He leans forward, his lips brushing past my cheek in a parody of a kiss. "You won't know it is there because I can turn my controls on and off, without you even realising, just by touching you and willing it to be so."

He pulls away from me, and I can see faux concern etched into his features. I want to snarl and snap at him, but my body is not mine to command. Instead, I simply stare forwards, taking in the blurred features of the smaller man in my peripheral vision and wondering what his next move will be.

Then he laughs, a high and unsettling noise, and I feel a wonderful sense of giddy lassitude flow through my body as he strokes my arm once more.

"Sir? Are you alright?"

Severus blinked slowly, and his eyes came into focus on the concerned features of Draco Malfoy. Once the surprise of seeing the presumed long-gone son of his oldest... associate had dissipated, he realised that he was swaying slightly in the grip of the younger man, whose hands were grasping his wrists firmly.

Draco's features were sharp with concern, his pale eyes wide and searching. "I ran right into you around this corner," he explained. "Almost knocked you flying, I'm afraid."

Snape fought to regain his dignity, firmly telling himself to focus. His heart was pounding for some reason, and his mouth tasted as if he had bitten his tongue.

"It's so good to see you again, Professor!" Draco said breathlessly, still holding the taller man in a tight, convulsive grip. Severus could feel Draco's fingertips rubbing small circles on the underside of his wrists. He pulled his hands up slightly and saw Draco's face flush as he stepped back, releasing his hold.

Severus cleared his throat. "It is... good to see you again, Draco," he said, his voice rougher than normal. He coughed again. Had he been knocked out? His heart was slowing its frantic pace, and his head throbbed painfully.

Draco was standing very still in front of him, as if he was waiting for Severus to say something more.

Severus blinked. *Hermione*. He was looking for Hermione. He remembered that that bastard Nott had somehow ended up accompanying her to Lucius' party, and he was unaccountably late, and—

"Shall we go and find Father?" Draco asked suddenly, smiling a little and gesturing with his hands that Severus should accompany him.

Severus frowned, mentally shaking himself. "Yes. Yes, of course, Draco," he replied, taking a stumbling step forwards. Draco caught his arm, and Severus steadied, berating his foolishness. Fancy being knocked sideways by someone he had once taught!

Draco seemed to find the situation rather amusing, but said nothing, merely pausing to sweep Severus' coat up from the grass before tugging Severus towards the Members Enclosure of the All England Tennis Club.

She was there of course, but before Severus could say anything much to her, Draco placed his hand gently on the Professor's arm and watched with a giddy sense of triumph as Snape immediately came under his control and quieted.

To think that he could be with that ugly witch he crowed to himself, thrilling to the sense of power that flowed through the connection between them. He flexed his fingers carefully, feeling the psycho-narcotic in his system prickle his senses. It wasn't long before he'd have to take the booster dose.

He watched, amused, as Granger's emotions splayed obviously across her face. Surprise and hurt. He fought the desire to snort. Her frown only enhanced the coarseness of her features, and Draco forced himself to be polite as he watched his father lead her away on a tide of eagerly chattering people.

After one last evaluative look at Draco and Snape, Nott followed.

"There she goes... What a poppet, your girl." Draco's voice had an eerie, sing-song quality to it. He spun around to face his old Head of House, rising slightly on the balls of his feet as he did so and bringing his hands together in front of him.

"So, Severus," he said. "Before we go up to watch the match, shall we have something to eat?"

The taller man made no answer, but that did not surprise or bother Draco particularly.

He reached over to the picnic table beside them and, with one hand, captured a tub of rich, ripe strawberries in his dextrous fingers. The other hand plunged inside his jacket and withdrew a small, thin tube containing tiny white crystals. His eyes dancing, Draco sprinkled some of the grains over the fruit.

He leaned forwards conspiratorially. "I don't know about you," he whispered. "But I cannot abide strawberries without sugar."

Again, Snape did not reply. Draco giggled. "I'm so pleased that we ran into each other, Severus," he said. "You have no idea how long I have waited to thank you for your support during those darker days."

A

A/N: All praise to JKR, and to Clairvoyant for the collaborative beta job!

Getting darker....

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 13

And Promises to Keep....

Chapter 9: And Promises to Keep...

"Have you ever watched tennis in the flesh before, Professor Granger?" Lucius Malfoy asked as he led her along the maze of wide corridors and up shallow staircases towards their seats.

Hermione risked a look over her shoulder. She could not see Severus and Draco in the mass of people around them, but Nott was just behind her. He winked and grinned, tipping his boater in a mock salute.

She turned back, about to reply, "No, not really," but lost her train of thought as she stumbled slightly on the fine, dark green carpet, clutching on to Malfoy's arm more firmly for support. He responded by tightening it firmly against his side.

Around them, Muggles bustled and jostled along the corridor, speaking excitedly to each other.

Hermione fought down the sense of panicked claustrophobia that clawed at her throat as she was drawn along on Lucius Malfoy's arm.

Where is he? Why didn't he follow?

Oblivious to her frantic thoughts, Lucius chuckled. "I take it from your silence that you are not a follower of sporting events, Professor. But no matter! I hope that the occasion will make up for any shortcomings in the game itself."

Hermione's hand was trapped firmly between Lucius' elbow and his chest. She flexed her fingers *Where is Severus?* "I...erm... No... no," she stuttered politely, her feet catching a little on the carpet beneath her feet.

Many of the surrounding people seemed to peel away, continuing along the wide corridor before them. She felt herself manoeuvred along briskly, borne powerlessly away, as Lucius directed her to the right and along another smaller corridor towards a second longer staircase.

This will never bloody do! She was not used to being guided along so forcefully, and the panic that threatened to consume her at his actions resurfaced. She pushed it determinedly away. *Get a grip, Hermione!* she berated herself. Taking a deep breath, she flexed her trapped fingers, making to pull her hand away from his arm. "Mister Malfoy," she began firmly.

"Lucius, please!" he corrected, gripping her arm tighter as they approached the second staircase.

She looked upwards. These steps appeared to lead up to an open space at the top. She could see the bright blue of the sky pouring light into the stairwell. Hermione could hear Nott right behind her, his breath huffing slightly and his feet tripping occasionally on the risers of the steps. In contrast to the younger man behind her, Malfoy appeared to be very fit and healthy. He did not seem to be breathing more heavily than usual, and the pressure of his arm on her right hand remained firm and constant.

"Professor Granger, you cannot imagine what a change has been wrought in me over these past years," Lucius spoke smoothly as they approached the top of the staircase.

Hermione could feel an increase in anticipation in the atmosphere... an eager anticipation. Lucius increased the pace of their climb, practically bouncing from step to step, and he urged her upward. She could hear Nott's footfalls falling steadily further behind.

"Oh... yes?" she managed, now using her other hand on the stair rail to pull herself along. She was beginning to regret her recent lack of exercise. The life of a schoolmistress was regrettably sedentary.

Malfoy chuckled she could feel his ribs move against her trapped hand. "Yes, Professor Granger! Since the Fall, I have had to embrace many new ideas... adopt new thinking patterns... take up ballroom dancing. My Rehabilitation... encouraged me to delve deeply into Muggle culture and society. I have achieved a far greater understanding of these astonishingly fascinating people."

She paused, pulling him to a standstill on the steps still a few feet before the top. "The fall?" she asked, cursing her breathlessness.

A shadow seemed to cross Malfoy's handsome face for a second, but he smiled once again and waved his free hand airily above him. "Why, the Fall of the Dark Lord, my dear lady," he explained. "The end of days," he added quietly, his pale eyes searching hers with an intensity that made her shiver.

Her arm itched. *Mudblood*, a voice hissed in her mind.

Lucius leaned forwards. "Imagine!" he whispered, the heat from his breath caressing her cheek. "Muggles have no magic, but despite that terrible handicap, they can still wield such *power*."

She wondered if he could hear the thumping of her heart in her chest, and then she realised that the pounding noise in her ears was the sound of Nott's heavy feet thumping up the stairs to where they were standing.

Nott reached the silent pair and stopped, looking between both of them, breathing heavily. "Well, thanks for waiting," he gasped sourly. "Bloody Muggle cigarettes... I knew they were bad for me!"

Lucius leaned back away from her and rolled his eyes. "You should take up the foxtrot, Mr Nott," he sneered. "It does wonders for one's *stamina*. Come, Professor," he added with a flourish, "we have a tennis match to attend."

"Darling, *do* come along!" Impatience tempering her voice, Narcissa Black-Malfoy swept through the Members' Enclosure of the All England Club. Her Muggle lover trotted slightly behind her, clearly still somewhat overwhelmed by his surroundings.

"I can't believe we've got tickets for the mens' final," he said for the seventh time in less than an hour.

"I can't believe that we are so late in getting here," she muttered under her breath as they moved quickly between the now virtually empty picnic tables. The Muggle waiters and waitresses were clearing up empty champagne bottles and strawberry punnets. A few latecomers were still finishing off their drinks.

She paused before her reflection in the large windows of the entrance hallway to take in her appearance, self-consciously straightening her back and tossing her hair backwards as she regarded her décolletage critically. The charms were holding well. She nodded in satisfaction.

"You look beautiful, baby," he murmured behind her, curling his large hands about her slim waist, pulling her uncomfortably off balance and springing back with a startled yelp as her shrewdly executed wandless hex struck, shooting a sharp burst of sparks into his skin.

"Static electricity, darling," she explained soothingly, still looking at herself in the window while he rubbed his hands to dissipate the pain.

"Simply shocking, Mother...," Draco's languid drawl caused her to smile even more widely as she turned to greet her son.

She looked her boy up and down. "Darling," she cooed, noting his girth, the sheen on his skin, his unhealthy pallor and reddened cheeks. "You look marvellous."

Draco smiled at her, as if he could read her real response. "Never better, darling. I thought you were already up in the Box," he added, flicking a brief and calculating look at the Muggle beside her. "Father arrived a few minutes ago... along with our other guests."

He moved to one side, and Narcissa could see that Severus Snape was sitting, pale and still, on one of the garden chairs beside Draco. He did not acknowledge her. Narcissa frowned... this was unexpected.

"Hi! You must be Draco. Cissy has told me all about you!"

Draco winced and recoiled from the rough hand that had been thrust towards him. He looked at his mother again and flicked his fingers at her impertinent paramour who immediately froze where he stood, the foolish, open smile still on his face.

"I use that one, too," Narcissa admitted, moving slightly away from her lover and casting another evaluative look at the still and silent Snape.

"Apes," spat Draco quietly.

She blushed, glancing again at the stupid Muggle tennis coach, his handsome face stuck unblinkingly in that rictus grin of surprise.

"Well, I suppose at least this one is pretty," Draco grudgingly allowed with a long suffering air.

"But insufficient for my... long term needs," Narcissa finished.

"You want father back," Draco's voice was flat and calm, his pale eyes watchful.

She sighed, frustrated, and shook her head. "Not like he is now. He is not the same man he once was, Draco."

"He wants you," Draco stated, inspecting the fingernails on his right hand. It shook slightly under his gaze, and she thought she saw him blush slightly. "The Manor is in decline... the magic is failing. You must return." His eyes rose to meet hers again. "Consider it a protection of my inheritance," he added, and she heard a certain ring of arrogant authority in his voice.

Narcissa made a small disparaging noise. "Putting the Manor in my name was no more than a mechanism to avoid the seizure of the estate by the Wizengamot. I was stuck in that mouldering pile like some sort of prisoner while Lucius was Rehabilitated... Then when he came home, all the ungrateful bastard did was watch Muggle musicals and take dancing lessons. He did nothing... he was nothing. There is nothing left of my husband."

She flicked a glance at the motionless man beside her and felt her chin rise defensively. "Naturally, I needed an outlet for my... energies. I..."

Draco held up one meticulously manicured finger to her lips, startling her into silence. "I said that you wanted him back, Mother," he whispered quietly. "I promised in my letter that I could deliver him to you as he was... before the Mudblood-loving Potterlings took away everything from him!"

Narcissa felt a shiver of adrenaline race across her skin. She shot another look at the silent figure of Severus Snape, sitting neatly with his hands folded before him, a thin stream of red strawberry juice on his chin.

"How will you do it?" she breathed.

*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*

A/N: Clairvoyant and beawefully2 are wonderful. Thank you also to all those who read and review.... I'm sorry about the gaps between updates recently. Real Life... grrrr!

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 13

End Game Part 1

Chapter 10: End Game Part 1

If the journey to her seat had been strange, the final few steps, out into the bright sunlight of the June afternoon, were bordering on the surreal.

"Is this the Royal Box?" Hermione blurted, shocked.

She stared at the rows of green upholstered seats arranged in neat rows before her. The seats formed a block, distinct from the other seating arrangements, at one end of the tennis court.

Lucius' eyebrows lifted in some surprise. "These are the finest seats at the Championships, my dear. Only the best for my guests, after all."

He moved ahead of her, nodding his head in greeting to a particular gentleman with a balding pate and a neatly sculpted beard. The elderly man waved back.

"There's somebody here today who is much more important than that example of minor royalty," Lucius whispered to her and waggled his eyebrows.

"Cliff Richard?" she hazarded wildly. "Wait, wasn't he banned in 1996?"

"Look over there," he directed. "On the side to the right."

Hermione scanned the crowd, but could not see anyone she recognised... just row upon row of excitable fans.

To her surprise, other people in the box also greeted Lucius as they slowly manoeuvred their way to their seats. He appeared to be well known. Lucius revelled in the attention, a word here, a bow there, even a "... and how is your lovely daughter, Minister?" at one point. Each time he was acknowledged, he seemed to check that she had seen it, proud of the attention and keen that she should witness it.

It was the oddest thing. Malfoy... Malfoy who had dismissed all non-magical folk as beneath regard... who was part of Voldemort's inner circle, promulgating the spread of supremacist views, at the heart of anti-Muggle actions during the war, whose Gringotts account had, according to Ginny, been closed by the Ministry in partial recompense for his crimes.

She could feel Nott behind her as they shuffled along the row of seats behind Malfoy.

"What on earth is going on?" Hermione hissed at Nott as she excused herself past a disdainful-looking woman in dark glasses. "How does he know all of these people?"

She felt Nott's breath close to her ear. "Games," she heard him whisper sourly. "Money talks, Hermione. Can't you see what's happening?"

She swivelled around and glowered at him. "If I could see what was going on," she hissed through gritted teeth, "I wouldn't be asking you. I thought he didn't have any money his assets were stripped at the end of the war."

"Sorry... sorry...." she added as she manoeuvred awkwardly past two more spectators in the row.

Nott snorted quietly, but did not offer any further comment.

Lucius stopped in front of her and turned to sit with a flourish. He looked about him, seemingly searching for someone in the crowd, and appeared to be rather disappointed. He twisted again in his seat as she reached him, but when she sat down beside him and Nott took his seat next to her, he turned his attention upon her again.

She shifted in her seat uncomfortably under his intense stare.

"Will Severus and Draco be joining us soon?" she asked and hoped that she was not sounding as desperate as she was beginning to feel. For all the wide open space of the tennis arena, she was feeling horribly claustrophobic. What on earth had she been thinking, accepting this invitation to see Malfoy again? For all her bravado around the kitchen table with Ginny, she knew that she was out of her depth.

Lucius smiled and laid a hand on her wrist. "I am sure that they will be along shortly, my dear," he replied smoothly. His fingers were cool, and she tried not to flinch at the contact.

"Draco had something he wished to discuss first with his old Head of House. He was very fond of Severus, you know," he added, and his eyes flicking briefly but pointedly towards Nott beside her. "Severus was quite the mentor to my boy while he was at school."

Hermione felt Nott's leg stiffen against hers for a moment, and then he deliberately moved away from her.

"I see," she said. Lucius had not moved his hand, and she fought the urge to jerk her hand free.

Malfoy cleared his throat. "Unfortunately, we both lacked Severus' judgement on certain matters in the past... something for which we must both..." he sighed, and his fingers moved lightly on her skin, "atone... among other things."

She stared at him, and he met her gaze directly, his eyes heavy lidded against the sunshine *is this remorse?* she thought and shivered, dislodging his fingers from her arm

with the slight movement. *I hate this. Why the hell doesn't anyone have a normal conversation?* She thought of Harry and Ron and their Auror training... and how she had decided to pursue her academic goals rather than follow them into the world of intrigue and law enforcement. The silly banter around Harry's breakfast table seemed a world away.

She tried to redirect the conversation to something safer. "What will Draco do for a living now?" she asked.

Lucius frowned, then shrugged. "Oh, he will find something to occupy himself, I am sure."

Drugged.

Severus could not move.

Fear rose within him, strangling his throat and making his heart beat uncertainly. But almost as soon as he recognised the emotion, he felt himself trying to tamp it down, suppressing it, using those war-hewn instincts that had saved him so many times before. He could breathe. He could control his breathing. *Breathe, dammit!* He concentrated purely on that for a while until his lightheadedness began to abate.

Once he had himself a little more under control, he tried to explore his senses, although his thoughts were disjointed and slow.

He was hot. It was a hot day. He was sitting down. Rough wood under his forearms. He could feel sweat pooling uncomfortable at the base of his spine, pricking his underarms... making his neck itch where the scars chafed on his shirt collar. There was a metallic tang in the back of his throat. His hearing was... off...

He found that he could blink, but he could not move his eyes in their sockets. He could swallow, but not move his tongue *That is interesting...*, he thought, although he couldn't quite think why.

It was very bright. The sunlight was casting sharp shadows everywhere.

Bright lights danced at the periphery of his vision. He watched them for a while, delighting in their colours. The shimmering lights fought against the shadows, twirling and morphing into twisted shapes and darker visions.

Narcissa's voice... He could hear her... and Draco. Then a different male voice that he didn't recognise. He winced inwardly when he felt the snap of magic that silenced the man. The dancing colours in his vision receded, and he could tell he was sitting at a table, his hands cupped in front of him. There was a bowl of strawberries and three empty wine glasses. A fly crawled slowly across his knuckle. Instinctively, he made to flick it away... but his hand did not move, and he remembered that he had been...

Drugged.

He forced his mind to consider a series of potion ingredients that could produce psychotropic effects, but his thoughts refused to come into line they were sluggish and intractable.

He shook himself mentally. *Stupid, Severus old man. Stupid! Focus!* He mentally reviewed the list, considering Acacia, Echinopsis, Lophophora, Mimosa, Atropa belladonna, Datura, Mandragora... even Fly agaric. He could name many of them easily, knew well their effects and their properties, but he dismissed each because of how it was administered... and the effects didn't equate to how he was feeling.

Draco was talking again, sharing something with his mother.... Severus could see him move from the corner of his eye, could hear his voice coming closer to him. The sound of the boy's voice slid smoothly over his senses.

What was he thinking of? *Ah, yes.... Zembyeva wood? Bitter... but not if one sweetened it, of course. Not delicate enough for selective paralysis...*

Ayahuasca? Caapi? Rapé dos Indios? No... the visions were not vivid enough to indicate the South American variants.

What about Psilocybe Semilanceata? That could induce selective paralysis... frankly could do a hell of a lot more than that but could that explain that metallic taste on the tongue... it was almost... synthetic.

Draco moved to his side and ran featherlight fingers slowly along his upper arm and across his shoulder *Ahhhh*. Severus could feel the blood coursing through his veins, the beat of his heart, the spasm of his lungs, breathing... He tensed to resist he had resisted before, after all. No-one better. *No-one brighter. Brightest wizard of his age who had said that...?*

But as he felt Draco's fingers brush the side of his neck, the metallic tang in his mouth grew sharper and more bitter, and an overwhelming rush of pleasant calm rushed through him, bathing him in certainty, caressing him in peace. He scrambled for his thoughts, but felt them pouring away from him under the caress, the tendrils of his awareness slipping away as he lost himself to the pleasure of Draco's will.

Yes, he would stand.

He stood.

Yes, he will follow.

He followed.

Lucius leaned even closer to her. She felt his breath on her cheek, the pull of his fingers on her wrist.

"You seem a little uncomfortable, Hermione," he breathed. "I do not wish you to be uncomfortable. I want you to enjoy yourself today. It is a special occasion, after all." He gestured with his other hand, at the crowd sitting about them, rich with anticipation. His cane trapped strongly between his thighs rolled slightly, and the emerald eyes of the silver serpent that tipped it glinted in the bright sunlight.

"Do you see, Professor Granger?" he sighed. "I need you."

"What do you want of me?" Hermione's voice was a whisper.

His pale face was flushed with a sort of triumph, and his eyes danced. He darted a look about himself and opened his mouth to...

"Lucius, darling!"

Malfoy jerked backwards at the strident call, and Hermione jumped too, feeling a sickening swoop of adrenaline slice through her.

"Narcissa, my sweet. How strange to bump into you here!" he replied smoothly.

Hermione turned about to see Narcissa Malfoy's autocratic features change from a twisted sneer of recognition to a bright and false smile.

"Now, Lucius... you know my interest in tennis, darling," she trilled, making her way down the shallow steps beside their row of seating. The older witch was wearing a tasteful trouser suit in some sort of dark, sheer material. Jewels glimmered about her throat.

Lucius smirked. "Oh yes, indeed... your *tennis interest*. Is he here?"

"Somewhere." Narcissa flicked her long fingers dismissively. "I see you have... guests, darling."

"Yes indeed." Lucius looked at Hermione again, his gaze lingering on her before returning to his wife. "Professor Granger... my wife Narcissa Malfoy."

"*Black Malfoy*," corrected Mrs Malfoy. "I do wish you'd remember that."

"Narcissa, you do remember Miss Granger? Not only the brightest witch of her age, but of course the best friend of our esteemed Saviour himself?"

Harry, Hermione thought. *Is all of this because of Harry?*

"Charmed, my dear. That is such a pretty dress... and your hair I do so love the *natural* look." Hermione's eyes narrowed slightly at the thinly disguised insult.

"I have just been speaking to my son in the Members' Enclosure. Draco mentioned that you were here today," Narcissa continued. "I am so surprised that Lucius has been able to draw you out from the security of your ivory tower...."

Draco. Severus. Hermione's breath caught. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was very wrong.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Malfoy," Hermione said pointedly, her eyes narrowed. "Have you seen Severus?"

Narcissa stared at her for a second, an amused expression on her face. Two seconds passed. Then she deliberately allowed her eyes to slide to Hermione's left. "Oh!" she trilled. "Is that you, Theodore? So lovely to see you after all that unfortunate business..."

A sudden burst of tumultuous applause and shouting erupted about them. The other spectators surged to their feet, cheering and calling out as the officials and players walked out onto the green court below them. Lucius spun around and joined in the cheering and clapping for the two competitors beneath them.

Hermione took advantage, grabbing Narcissa's arm roughly and pulling her close. "Stop messing me around, and answer the bloody question, you supercilious cow!" she hissed in the woman's ear. "Where the hell is Severus? What have you done with my him?"

The Muggle umpire was making an announcement, and the crowd quietened down quickly around them.

Narcissa's muscles tensed, and Hermione felt a sudden and sharp pain in her hand which caused her to let go of the other woman's arm, the unpleasant magical aftershock still skittering under her skin. "*Manners, darling*," the older witch drawled, straightening. "Your... well, it's hardly in order to call him your boyfriend, is it? *Severus* is just down there... with Draco. Look...."

The spectators chattered excitedly and shifted in their seats. The players were warming up, excited *boohs* and *ahhhs* accompanied each strike of the ball on the court. However, Hermione's attention was diverted as her gaze followed in the direction of Narcissa's sharp nail-point to seats about twenty feet away from them on the very edge of the box.

Severus was standing next to Draco, so close that his arm was brushing against the younger man. As she looked on, she saw Draco slowly reach up and offer Severus a strawberry. "But...", she said, feeling foolish and lost. "Severus hates strawberries."

She watched as Snape, his eyes fixed on Draco's, slowly opened his mouth and accepted the fruit.

"It seems that he has overcome his dislike of certain things," Theodore Nott's said, and his voice had lost its customary sardonic inflection. It sounded hollow, like her heart.

*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*

A/N: Believe it or not, but Sir Cliff really was banned from Wimbledon in 1996, following a particularly dodgy rendition of "Singin' In The Rain" at the Championships, which allegedly left spectators traumatised and unable to enjoy the rest of the tennis. The ban was only lifted in 2013. This says a lot about the Lawn Tennis Association.

A/N2: This work of fiction was brought to you via the genius of beawesley2 and Clairvoyant, and with the tacit indulgence of JK Rowling. I own nothing here....

Chapter 11: End Game Part 2....

Chapter 11 of 13

End Game, part 2....

Chapter 11: End Game Part 2

Severus ate the strawberries.

Severus ate the strawberries.

Severus hates strawberries.

"Laaadieees and gentlemen! Please take your seats, as play is about to begin! Spectators are reminded that flash photography is not allowed while the ball is in play. Thank you!" The Muggle umpire's voice sounded loud and confident above the excited hubbub of the crowd.

About her, people began to sink back into the seats in the Royal Box, arranging themselves comfortably, chattering in excited whispers about the game ahead. She caught snatches of conversation.

"... Just as good as Borg..."

"... Two hundred on..."

"... Not like it was when..."

"... Taking the first set..."

Hermione stared blankly at the back of Severus' head, unable to breathe. As she looked on, she saw Draco reach up and stroke Severus' cheek with the fingers of one curled hand.

Narcissa leaned over her shoulder and made a small satisfied noise in her throat. "Not *yours* anymore, I think, Professor," she murmured in Hermione's ear.

"I believe that you will need to take your seat, dear." Lucius' voice cut through the rushing sound in Hermione's ears. He placed a proprietorial hand on Hermione's arm. "Shouldn't you be looking for your Muggle... companion?"

Narcissa's lips thinned. "Very well, *husband*," she spat. Hermione did not miss the emphasis that she placed on the final word. "I'll leave you and your *delightful* guest to the game. I believe that the view will be better from my seat, anyway."

Lucius smirked in great satisfaction as his wife spun on her heels and stalked away, up the shallow steps in the aisle towards the rear of the box. He wagged his eyebrows at Hermione, who was still staring at him in a kind of stunned haze.

He leaned forwards towards her once more. "Thank you, my dear," he murmured. "That was just what the doctor ordered." He giggled suddenly. "Narcissa will be absolutely *furious*...!"

Hermione looked at him in confusion. "W what? Mr Malfoy, I..." Her voice sounded incongruously loud amidst the hush of the surrounding spectators, and a silver haired man sitting in front of her turned around, scowling at them.

"Shhhh, my dear!" whispered Lucius, patting her arm again, his eyes dancing. "Let us watch the game. They are about to tee off."

A dark corridor. Figures move and come together. The smell of sweat and fear and desperation hangs heavily in the air.

"Did you think I would not try to ask again? I can help you, you stupid boy." There is a desperate urgency in the deep, cajoling voice.

"I don't need your fucking help. I don't need that!" The reply is panicked, overwrought. A thin hand reaches forward, placed tentatively onto the fine silk of the dark dress robes before him. The younger man's voice softens, almost like yearning. "You know what I want..."

The taller figure stills. "Not that, Draco..." Snape tries to put understanding into his voice. This isn't the first time a prized pupil has fancied themselves in love with their Head of House. But Draco's infatuation is also dangerous. Severus can feel it in the magic that swirls about them, seeking, probing, twisting in the thin air of the cold castle walls.

Snape sighs and makes to speak, hoping to be gentle despite the urgency of the situation, but he is shoved away roughly with a barely contained sob as the boy half-ran away from him along the silent flagstoned corridor. His footfalls echo long after he disappears from sight.

There is a small gasp to his right, and Severus tenses. Had they been overheard? He quickly replays the little scene again in his mind, calms himself and turns.

In the shadows of the corridor, half-hidden by a large tapestry, stands Theodore Nott. The young Slytherin shakes with emotion, his hands balled tightly into fists by his side.

The match was finely balanced, the crowd rowdily enthusiastic, hooting and applauding the physicality of the players as they skidded and lunged, smashed and parried around the court.

Lucius was thoroughly excited, as caught up with the action as almost everyone else around him. "For a game with only one ball and two players, this really is surprisingly enjoyable," he commented, hunched forward over his silver-tipped cane.

Hermione nodded absently, keeping half an eye on the game before them and the other half on Severus and Draco. Part of her mind was still numb with shock. She had had no idea. No idea at all that there had been something between Severus and Draco. She fixed her attention on the oddly coordinated familiarity of their body language, trying to make sense of the way that they were sitting so closely together; Draco's head was virtually on Severus' shoulder, for Merlin's sake! Why was Snape allowing it? In the all too short days of her liaison with him, he had not even allowed her to take his arm in the corridors of the school....

Indeed, apart from that first night at the pub and the time they had spent together in their private chambers, he had not even allowed her to touch him at all. *At all!*

Hermione felt a wave of deep hurt and angry resentment wash through her. *Perhaps*, she thought, feeling her face begin to flush and her throat tightening *this was all a huge mistake.*

Her heart began thumping in her chest so heavily that she could feel it in her throat *Was this all a game to get me to this place? To trap me? To humiliate me?* Hot tears threatened to spill onto her cheeks, and she blinked furiously. *Is Severus a part of this?*

She dashed quick looks to her left and right. Lucius was still engrossed in the game, clapping and cheering the players on. Nott, on the other hand, was also watching Severus and Draco, his face tense and drawn. Hermione frowned. *What...?*

"Look! Look, my dear!" Lucius' delighted cry interrupted her painful thoughts. "They are changing their balls!"

Hermione stared at him for a horrified moment before she realised what he actually meant.

"I... I thought that you would be more familiar with tennis. After all..." Hermione waved her hand to indicate their surroundings.

"After all...?"

"Well, you are a member here! I thought..."

"Oh no, my dear girl! Don't be so droll. A simple bribe and Confundus Charm on the Membership Committee..." He waved his hand airily at her shocked expression.

He shot a quick glance behind them both and then grinned maniacally at her. "Can she see me? Can Narcissa see me?" he asked breathlessly as the players completed another exhausting rally to tumultuous applause. The crowd shifted and undulated, some standing up and stretching, chattering excitedly to one another. Lucius strained to see behind them.

Hermione couldn't have cared less what Narcissa Malfoy was doing. She shifted uncomfortably as he leaned over again.

"That's not all I can do," Malfoy murmured in her ear. "Care to see?"

The play resumed. The taller of the two finalists bounced the ball in his hand once, twice, three times... bent his knees... tossed the ball in the air, and...

The ball dropped to his feet, unstruck.

The crowd *ooohed* in surprise.

Malfoy smirked.

The player called for another ball and began to go through his pre-serve preparations as before.

"Top left hand corner," whispered Lucius.

The racket blurred, and the ball flew forwards... hitting the top left hand corner of the box.

"Fifteen, love," the umpire called.

The serving player reset himself. Bounced the ball. Bent, dipped...

"Middle right, fifteen all," Lucius murmured.

And struck. The ball hit the middle right of his opponent's serving box and was returned with a swerving low back-handed volley that left him standing.

"Fifteen all!"

"Stop it!" Hermione hissed.

Lucius snickered a little at her expression. "You see, the slightest impetus can push an object off balance, can make it behave as it shouldn't..."

He twirled the serpent cane again in his fingers.

The crowd *aaahed*.

"Fifteen, thirty!"

He leaned closer again. "How do you think I rebuilt my fortune, Professor?"

"Fifteen, forty!"

Hermione pulled back from him, jostling into Nott with her shoulder. "That's illegal!" she blurted, her voice sounding shrill in her ears.

Lucius tutted and waggled his fingers. "I prefer to think of it as good karma, Professor. What goes around..." He waggled his eyebrows knowingly.

"Malfoy men are used to getting what they want, eh, Lucius?" Nott muttered. "No matter what the cost."

Lucius smiled at that and lifted the cane slightly, his fingers caressing the flat top of the snake's head.

The crowd roared, and a thunder of applause swept the court.

"Game and second set!" called the umpire. The crowd erupted again into a riot of excitement. The players returned to their seats for the break between games.

Hermione's attention was drawn once more to the dark figure sitting stiffly below them, Draco's arm draped casually around the seat behind his shoulder. Her heart constricted painfully again.

"And what about Draco?" she asked Lucius as if poking a sore tooth. "Has he got what he wants?"

Lucius pursed his lips. "Oh, I'm sure he will find his way." At her arched eyebrow, Lucius sighed in an exaggerated manner and brushed a speck of dust from his jacket's arm.

"Draco prefers to labour for his rewards. He has recently developed an interest in... Oh, what do they call them? Muggle potions. If it hadn't been for the... distractions... of his teenage years, he would no doubt have been studying for his mastership by now. He served his Rehabilitation at one of their Muggle hospitals and aided their Healers in the... What was the name of the place? The *pharmacy*. I believe that he has developed some interesting compounds of his own, isn't that right, Theodore?"

Nott made a small strangled noise in the back of his throat and looked away, back to where Draco was running a possessive finger along Severus' collar beneath his hair.

She watched Severus shudder under his touch, then relax.

Sod this, she thought suddenly. *Sod it all. I'm leaving.*

She rose to her feet, just as the crowd began to cheer and bay in anticipation. Confused by the sudden outburst, Hermione spun about, then realised that the players had finished their break and were taking their places for the next set.

"Professor?" Malfoy asked her, surprised.

"Hermione?" Nott reached up to catch her arm. She jerked it free, scowling fiercely at her colleague.

Hermione turned to face Lucius, her jaw set and her fingers brushing over the wand hidden in her clutch bag. "I'm leaving," she hissed baldly. "I don't know what you are all playing at, you manipulative bastards, but I want nothing to do with any of you." She glowered at Nott and had the brief satisfaction of seeing him blanch under her angry regard. She could not bear to look in Severus' direction.

"Would all spectators please take their seats quickly, as play is about to resume..." The umpire's announcement prompted a ripple of applause from the Muggle spectators around the tennis court.

"Please don't go, Professor," Malfoy urged. "I apologise for my outrageous display earlier. I fear that I was... showing off."

"What do you want, Mr Malfoy?" she asked him bluntly. "Why did you invite me and Severus here today?"

"... Play is about to begin, ladies and gentlemen... *Madam*, would you please take your seat without delay?"

Hermione glanced down towards the umpire and was shocked to see the serving player bouncing his ball pointedly while staring up directly at her.

Automatically, her knees buckled, and she all but collapsed into her seat. The ironic applause that broke out around her swiftly dissipated as she cast abrupt nonverbal Muffliato.

The fingers of her right hand gripped her wand tightly.

Malfoy's expression was slightly abashed.

"What do you want of me?" she reiterated, her voice sounding unnaturally loud in the silent bubble that Muffliato provided. She had had enough of Slytherin posturing and half-truths.

To her surprise, she saw twin spots of pink bloom on his cheekbones.

"Enough. You should just ask her, Lucius." Nott's voice held the same bored note in it that Severus used when he was particularly anxious about something.

Lucius shot him a brief, poisonous look. "Miss... Professor Granger," he began. "I want... to beg for your forgiveness." He paused, clearly ruffled. "And ask for your endorsement."

*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*

A/N: beaweasley2 and Clairvoyant are utterly wonderful. So is JKR, who owns all these characters, and those of you who take the time and trouble to review! Two more chapters to go now....

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 13

Game, set....

Chapter 12: Game, Set....

"Professor Granger," Lucius Malfoy began. "I want... to beg for your forgiveness," he paused, clearly ruffled, "and ask for your endorsement."

Hermione stared at him in dumbfounded shock, watching as he carefully assembled an expression on his face that was part humble plea and part insouciant sneer.

A hundred questions queued up to fight for the use of her larynx. *What the hell do you mean? Why didn't you lose everything as you should have done at the end of the war? Why did you follow Him? Why did you let her torture me? How did you survive? What is Draco doing, touching Severus like that?* But they were so huge that they were impossible to say aloud.

What actually escaped her lips was an abstract *whirring* sound.

Lucius frowned, clearly disconcerted by the odd noise she had emitted.

Hermione tried again. "My... endorsement?" she asked. "For what?"

Lucius darted another look about him and cleared his throat. "I am tired of being on the outside, Professor," he said. "I need to *matter* again in our world."

Hermione sat back in her chair. "And you think...?" she began.

"Professor Granger, it has been a long time since the end of the war. I saved what I could of my property and financial reserves through the transfer of money from the *goblins*," the sneer in his voice was unmistakable, "to Muggle bank accounts in Panama, Monaco, and the Seychelles... served my time in Rehabilitation... and then settled down to a life of peaceful obscurity and humble penance."

He twirled his cane again. The emerald eyes on the serpent's head glittered in the bright sunshine, catching her attention.

"But it was not enough," he continued. "Of course I enjoyed learning how to fit into Muggle society, attending their theatres and museums... I even learned to understand their financial institutions and their sporting obsessions. For a few months, it was a pleasant diversion. My wife even took up tennis." His face twisted slightly at that. "But for all the financial rewards I have achieved in Muggle society, for all the ways in which I have been able to contribute towards that society through charitable works and my financial patronage... I feel a terrible loss, Professor. A terrible loss."

His voice was carefully pitched, low and pitiable.

"And so I need your help. I want to return to our people, Professor." There was yearning in his voice.

"You said you wanted my forgiveness." Hermione said flatly, not taken in.

"Yes. Yessss, of course." Lucius hung his head a little. "What happened in my home. To you. Was... unfortunate. Despicable. I regret it deeply." He bowed his head even further... and waited.

Hermione looked at him suspiciously.

"Oh, he means it," offered Nott from beside her, still with that peculiar sting in his tone. "He has been bored for months. After all, there are only so many routines from *Singin' in the Rain* and *Mary Poppins* that you can learn, eh, Lucius? And," he leaned forward and wagged his finger, "he's also missing his missus, aren't you, sir?"

Lucius' lip pulled back, and the fingers on his cane tightened until she could see the white bone of his knuckles through the translucent flesh. "As you say, Mister Nott. I want my wife back." He lifted his head to level an unblinking stare again at Hermione. "And a public recommendation from one of the Golden Trio will undoubtedly go a long way towards raising my standing in wizarding society... which will no doubt prompt Narcissa to return...."

A public recommendation... *So that's what the slimy bastard is after*, she thought grimly.

"So that your Manor which you transferred into Narcissa's name immediately after The Fall to avoid its confiscation will once again recognise its legal owner, and the property will restore itself to its former glory," supplied Nott, again with an edge to his voice, "and with your endorsement, Hermione, Lucius will then be able to transfer all his holdings back into his name, fully resume his Gringotts account without fear of additional confiscation, be invited to all the best parties, stand for membership of the Wizengamot, become ever richer and more powerful, and live truly happily ever after...."

Lucius made a mocking little bow. "As you say, Theodore, happily ever after." He smiled tentatively again at Hermione, his face a perfect mixture of bashful entreaty and charming encouragement.

"No." Hermione said it quietly, but in the false silence of the Muffliato charm, the word was clearly audible. She cleared her throat. "No," she repeated, louder.

"Ahhhh," Lucius stroked the top of his cane again. "Draco thought that you might be a little reluctant to accept my entreaty. In that case, Professor Granger, may I propose... a trade?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Hermione scoffed. "You have nothing that I could possibly..."

Lucius held up a finger, effectively cutting her off. "On the contrary, Professor. I think that I have something that you do want, very much indeed."

Moving slowly, the long, pale finger gestured towards the two silent men sitting four rows below them, one as dark as nightshade, the other as pale as mistletoe.

Severus could feel Draco's soothing fingertips on the sensitive skin above his collar. The pleasure was indescribable. Arousal skittered along his nerves. If he had been able to move, he would have arched into Draco's touch. "How could you ever have cared for that silly witch?" the boy asked him, close and breathy in his ear, "when you could have had me?"

Not silly, he thought stubbornly. *Beautiful. Intelligent.*

Hermione... Hermione. He tried to think.

Draco's fingers stroked his skin again. *Aaaah! The pleasure of it...* Severus shivered.

Draco was whispering to him again. "Another strawberry, Severus?"

I don't like them. I don't want it. No. He tried to pull away, but his body would not move.

The boy's fingers played across his flesh again, and Severus almost fainted from the delightful sensations that they brought.

Yessss...

He opened his mouth.

Hermione stared at Lucius, then looked again at Severus bending into the touch of the fawning blonde beside him.

"What the hell do you mean?" she hissed angrily, her hand curling around the polished wood of her wand.

Malfoy purred, "Why, it's a simple exchange, Professor Granger. You scratch my back... and I will ensure that Severus is, ahhh, scratching yours again by the end of the day."

He giggled slightly as his own joke and sat back in his seat.

Hermione felt herself grow very cold.

She stared again at the two men sitting below her in the Royal Box. She watched Draco offer Severus another strawberry and the older man bite slowly into the fruit.

"I don't think it is a simple as that," Nott said.

Lucius flashed him an irritated look. "Draco will do as we agreed," he muttered flatly. "Severus is nothing to him. It was a temporary infatuation, nothing more. As you well know, Mister Nott."

"Oh, don't be so naive, Lucius," Nott spat bitterly. "It's never been about you, you arrogant prick. Draco wants Severus. He always has, and the Malfoys have a way of getting what they want."

"Draco's in love with Severus?" Hermione stammered.

"No. Gods, no." Nott laughed unhappily. "I'm not sure he knows the meaning of the word anymore."

Lucius' eyes darted between Nott's ruddy face and the pale perfection of his son's coiffure. Hermione could tell he was on edge.

"Wh-what are you implying?" Lucius blustered.

"Look, you were able to send me packing, you bastard, even though Draco and I were together." Nott blushed furiously. "But Draco wants something more in return for what Severus did to him after the war. That's why he developed Iago."

"What?" Hermione swivelled in her seat to fix Nott with a fierce glare. "What the hell is 'Iago'? What is going on, Theodore?"

Nott's face twisted into unhappiness, but whatever he was about to say died on his lips as his eyes widened.

The Muggle spectators around them were stretching and standing, their actions curiously silent thanks to the Muffliato Charm Hermione had cast. It was obviously another break in the play beneath them.

That was not the reason for Nott's tension and his silence.

Severus and Draco had turned around.

*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*

A/N: Uh--oh.... just what has Draco got planned for them all...? How much does Theodore Nott know? Will Severus be able to withstand Iago long enough to save the day? And are Lucius' dancing days soon to be over...? All these questions will be answered in the final chapter of this tale which will be posted on New Year's Day....

Thank you to those of you who take the time to review!

Beaweasley2 and Clairvoyant are wonderful, and so is JKR. I own nothing and make no money from this work of fiction.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 13

Game, Set and Match....

Chapter 13: Game, Set, and Match....

"*Finite Incantatum*," Hermione whispered in the unnatural silence of the Muffliato's spell.

Immediately, she was plunged back into the world of Centre Court's excited chatter and enthusiastic cheering. She could hear the umpire call the score and the scurry of tennis shoes on the now somewhat scruffy grass below as the ball boys and girls made their preparations for the next game.

Lucius winced at the suddenly clamour, and Nott swore in surprise.

Hermione did not care. She was searching out Severus' eyes across lines of other spectators in the Royal Box.

The strawberry tasted sour and sweet on his tongue, and he felt slightly nauseous from its unpleasant metallic tang. He gagged involuntarily, but eventually swallowed the sickly pulp.

His skin was so sensitive. As he breathed, the scar tissue around his neck rubbed uncomfortably on the crisp linen of his shirt. He was aware of his surroundings, but only peripherally. Everything was distorted, as if he were floating deep underwater. He blinked the sting of tears from his eyes.

But Draco's caress anchored him, soothed him. He closed his eyes. His heart swelled with the feeling of contentment that enveloped him.

Draco was stroking his hand gently, insistently. "You must listen, Severus," the boy murmured. Severus would have laughed if he could have, for how could he not listen to his beloved, his master, his beautiful Draco?

"You must do something for me, Severus," Draco continued, running his fingers lightly up his forearm, softly caressing the ridges of his scars. The pleasure of it was almost too much for Severus. He sucked in his breath through his teeth in ragged gasps and shivered in anticipation.

"The game is coming to an end, and then we shall both turn around," Draco whispered. "Are you ready?"

Something slipped into his hand. It was cold and smooth. Reflexively, Severus gripped it.

Magic flared across his senses.

My wand, he thought.

Draco lifted his chin arrogantly and placed a proprietorial hand on Severus' bare forearm. Severus stood beside him, his eyes lowered. He appeared to be shaking slightly.

"What have you done to him?" Hermione demanded, shocked by Severus' appearance.

Draco's hand on his arm seemed to burn through his skin. Severus embraced the sharp pain of it with gratitude, trembling under his touch.

"There she is, Severus." Draco mockingly inclined his head towards Hermione. "There's the witch who stands in the way of our happiness together."

Severus felt a deep anger rising, felt the emotions course through him, like poison. He could not quite focus on her face, but he could still see her. She had made his Draco unhappy, and Draco's unhappiness could not be borne.

His hand tightened on the wand.

Lucius shrugged. "Why nothing, my dear girl. Draco has merely reminded him of where his loyalties *truly* lie."

Hermione searched Severus' features for any sign of her lover's intentions. Strands of dark hair had fallen across his face, making it harder to read his features. He stood facing her, quivering like a bow under tension.

His eyes, usually his most expressive feature, seemed unfocused and curiously blank. *What is happening to him?* She hoped for anything, a sneer, the flick of his hair, even a sardonic eyebrow. Nothing.

Her sense of worry began to grow.

"As you see, my dear," Lucius added smugly, "He is quite under Draco's thrall."

Draco nodded once towards them contemptuously.

"Now, dear," Lucius added impatiently. "Your support in return for Severus' attentions. Do we have an accord?"

She saw Draco turn his head and whisper something in Severus' ear.

Severus' body stiffened further, and his shoulders hunched. She could see the muscles flexing in his bare forearms. Hermione flinched at the shift in his body language. Always an imposing figure, Severus was beginning to frighten her.

Lucius cleared his throat. "I'll take your silence as consent, then," he said dryly. "Very well," he added and nodded theatrically to his son.

Nothing happened for a moment, and then the smile on Draco's face twisted into something else, and he cocked his head on one side.

Hermione saw him mutter something else to Severus and watched in slowly dawning horror as the wand in Severus' hand slowly rose to point directly at her.

Some of the spectators were beginning to notice them, but Draco flicked his hand, and the stupid Muggles who had been nudging each other and pointing at the peculiar behaviour of the tall, long-haired man in the second row, suddenly appeared to lose interest and turned away.

"That's it, my darling," Draco whispered in the delicate shell of Severus' ear, the excitement and anticipation rising in his voice. *Years of planning, he thought, and here we are. Perfect... perfect!*

"What the fuck is Snape doing?" Lucius' voice had an edge of panic to it.

"It's ligo," Nott answered him, and she felt him shiver.

Keeping her voice deliberately calm and slow, despite the anxiety in her chest, she said, "He's pointing his wand directly at me. What's ligo, Theodore?"

Nott was shaking. "It's a drug. A Muggle potion. It enhances the susceptibility of a subject to suggestion."

"Mind control?" Hermione shot back, "Like the Imperius?"

Nott shook his head, his eyes were wide, and his face blanched of all colour. "I... it's undetectable. Synthetic and fast acting... But it's also very quick to dissipate from the human system, so Aurors can't spot it."

Lucius flapped his hands impatiently. "That's not the point," he snapped. "Draco didn't say anything about using this ligo drug. What is my son going to do with it?"

"Anything he wants to," Nott replied.

He choked on his emotions, tried to force his thoughts back into a coherent pattern. Before him, he could see his wand hand trembling. *What is wrong? Why can't I think properly?* He felt sweat dribble down his skin, pooling uncomfortably in the small of his back.

Draco was whispering in his ear again, urging him onwards... to cast the curse, to say the words and mean them *This* was the only way that Severus could atone, how he could make amends for his betrayal of Draco and his family, of the Dark Lord and his ambitions. Killing her would show the world that the followers of Dark magic could not be contained, could not be Rehabilitated, could not be neutered like fucking dogs.

"... And she's a bitch..." Draco's voice was soft and insinuating. "She cast you off for another man. There he is, right next to her..."

Severus saw Theodore Nott shaking, terrified beyond measure.

Why is Nott so frightened? he asked himself. Then he remembered Draco's explanation, and he smiled in satisfaction, his hand steadying. He will do it. He'd done it before, after all...

But suddenly he remembered the Tower, the smell of burning hexes and the savage battle below, the coppery taste of blood on his tongue from where he had bitten the inside of his cheek. Quick memories followed the first: Dumbledore's entreaty, reaching deep within himself for the intent to cast the darkest of the Unforgiveables, the numbness in his hand as he raised his wand, the horrible, rippling sensation in his body as he cast the Killing Curse.

The look of surprise on the old man's face as he fell.

"*Avada Kedavra*," whispered Draco urgently. "Do it, Severus!" And Snape felt the order transmit to his very bones.

But something wasn't right. He couldn't cast the curse.

Draco's voice grated on his nerves, the harmonics jarring and dissonant. He blinked, disconcerted. *What the hell am I doing?* he thought, confused.

"Look at her, Severus," Draco urged, clearly frustrated by his puppet's inaction. "Look at her, fucking Mudblood whore! Do it!"

His heart lurched. He stared at her, his eyes snapping into focus at Draco's command. There was something familiar about her... something... precious to him. If he could only *think*...

Draco's fingers dug into his arm. "What are you waiting for?" the boy hissed, snapping Severus back into focus.

Severus scowled, staring at Hermione's twisted body. She was half-sprawled over Nott, gaping across at him in fearful shock.

He had to know. He needed the intent to cast the curse. He needed it!

Her eyes locked onto his. It was all he required.

Legilimens! he thought with all his might.

"Draco, no!" shouted Lucius, raising his cane defensively, as Severus' thoughts exploded into her consciousness.

She rocked backwards under his fierce onslaught, barging Nott sideways and scrabbling to pull her wand free from her bag as she felt Severus bludgeon into her thoughts.

He grabbed at her memories ruthlessly, yanking at images from her thoughts with seemingly no regard for the pain which such actions would bring. He ripped open her feelings for him, those that lay so close to the front of her consciousness, splaying her insecurities and fears wide open with bestial intensity, testing them, tasting them. Her tentative regard, deepening to something else, her hopes for a future together with him, her hurt at their stupid argument over Malfoy's invitation, and his refusal to resolve their differences... the crushing sense of betrayal and loss she had felt as she saw him with Draco...

He rocked backwards mentally in surprise. *She does care for me, then...?*

The temporary respite was all Hermione needed.

Instinctively, she shoved back, pushing her Occlumency shields up and slamming the force of her will against his disorganised assault.

After a few heart stopping moments of disorientation, as she forced her way into those memories that were uppermost in his mind, she found herself standing at the top of the Astronomy Tower. The wind was howling about them, and muffled sounds of explosions echoed from deep below the stones. It was dark, only the moon and starlight illuminated the harsh faces of her companions. Bellatrix's features were contorted into hateful enthusiasm, she could hear Greyback snarling behind her, and Draco was standing still, his face a waxen mask of terror.

"Severus... please," she heard Albus say and looked into the eyes of the old man, rheumy but bright, sympathetic but resolute. She felt sick to her stomach as she listened to Dumbledore plead with Snape, reminding him of his duty, what he had sworn to do all those months ago in the old man's office.

She felt herself dig deeply, stabbing her wand towards him, reaching for the will, the dark intent that she needed to cast the killing curse.

But as she did so, Dumbledore's face began to shift and change... Hermione's vision blurred and brightened, resolving from the dark tumult of the Astronomy Tower to a warm June day at Wimbledon. Before her eyes, the old man grew younger, his features softening into Hermione's own, as she looked at herself, sprawled terrified before her.

Still within his thoughts, Hermione felt Snape's body freeze, unable to move or fulfil Draco's wishes.

She heard Draco's vicious expletive, and then Snape's wand was jerked abruptly from her unresisting fingers.

Is he trying to cast Avada Kedavra at me? she thought, terrified.

Hermione wrenched herself back from Snape's thoughts just in time to see Draco's left hand thrust forward holding Severus' wand, his lips contorted as he opened his mouth to speak, hatred evident in his spiteful lunge towards her...

"Avada K..."

"*Praetegere!*" Lucius shouted beside her, and the last thing Hermione saw was the flash of a spell cast before she lost consciousness.

She was lying down on something soft and being trampled by hippogriffs. That was the only possible explanation.

No, she thought, *Manticores*.

No, she corrected herself again, wincing as more pain fed into her nervous system, *Quintapeds*.

She moved her shoulders slightly and groaned. This was almost as bad as the Cruciatius.

The thought brought her up cold, and she froze, not daring to breathe, the events of the last few hours suddenly forcing themselves into her thoughts.

Where am I? What...?

She made to move again, tensing against the pain from her muscles.

Then a cool hand with long fingers slid across her forehead and into her hair.

"Shhhh, lie quietly, you silly girl," a deep, steady voice commanded gently.

Her heart leapt. "Severus...", she groaned, but stilled under his touch, cracking her eyelids open into the dimmed artificial lighting in the room.

"You are in the Spell Damage Ward of St Mungo's Hospital," Snape murmured quietly. "Temporarily," he added as she gasped in concern, her eyes opening wider.

"What ha..." Her voice sounded rough. Her throat was sore.

"You caught the backlash from Lucius' parry of a badly cast Killing Curse," he explained. "As did Mister Nott and three hapless Muggles who got in the way."

"Wh...?" she managed.

Severus' eyebrows raised. "Where are they?" he asked, and she tried to nod. "Not here. The Muggles are in an isolation ward, recovering from what they are being told is a nasty manifestation of sunstroke."

"Nott is in the Aurors' custody along with Lucius and Draco." His voice shook a little as he spat the names out. "So much for Rehabilitation."

Hermione moved her hand slowly on the bedcovers, her fingers opening painfully under her grimly determined direction.

She felt his fingers slowly interlace with hers.

"Hermione, I..."

"Shhhh." She squeezed his hand. "I know about the drug. It wasn't your fault."

She felt his relief in the way he slumped slightly above her.

"Are you okay?" she whispered, squinting up at him, seeing the shadows crossing his gaunt face, partly shielded by the thick fall of black hair. It was only then that she realised he was wearing a hospital gown himself. She lifted her eyebrows in a silent question.

He shrugged. "They'll find me eventually," he commented dryly. "The Healers want to take my temperature every half an hour and stick their wands into places that should not have wands stuck into. Even the idiot Potter might put two and two together and deduce that I would find my way here."

"Harry? Why?" she croaked.

He sighed. "The Auror Department have just completed their largest ever Obliviate. Once they have congratulated themselves on persuading all the spectators that Draco's curse was a particularly bright camera flash and duping millions of goggle-eyed Muggles watching the whole thing on television that what they saw was the over-exuberant celebration of a minor celebrity from *Britain's Got Talent* they will no doubt wish to speak with me further concerning Draco, Narcissa, and Lucius' roles in this... fiasco."

She nodded. "And me too, I suppose."

"Mmmmm," he agreed and stroked her forehead again.

Her eyelids fluttered closed. They remained like that for a time, breathing together.

"*Tis within ourselves that we are thus and thus*," she said softly.

"What?"

"You could never have hurt me," she whispered so quietly that she could barely hear herself. "It's not in your nature. I saw your thoughts."

"Foolish woman," he murmured back and stroked her hair once more. "Of course not. After all, *for she has eyes and chose me*."

She chuckled, tightening her hold on his fingers.

... And all was still.

*A

* Both Severus and Hermione are both quoting from Othello, naturally. *Rolls eyes*....

A/N: This story would have been impossible to produce without the aid of beawesley2 and Clairvoyant. Thank you so much, ladies! It goes without saying that I don't own these characters; they are the intellectual property of JK Rowling, and I make no money from them.

This story is the result of a prompt from the lovely HBAR, who read and reviewed every chapter of my story Anima Mea over one week. She requested the following: Severus and Hermione are a relatively new couple. Lucius and Draco are both single, one interested in Severus, the other interested in Hermione. They put their heads together and plan a way to each charm their half of the couple away from their current relationship and into their arms. Hermione quickly notices that something is up, but Severus is completely oblivious to their advances and thinks she is imagining things.

I hope that I have covered most of the challenge, although I probably did it in a way that she wasn't quite expecting....

Happy New Year, everyone. Let's hope it's a good one. Pxx
