

# Of Surprises and Detours

by Dreamy\_Dragon

After the war, not all is well as people are trying to get on with their lives. When two former enemies meet again, things start to take unexpected twists and turns...

## One

Chapter 1 of 4

After the war, not all is well as people are trying to get on with their lives. When two former enemies meet again, things start to take unexpected twists and turns...

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Standing before the mirror, Hermione tried to turn to get a better look at her long-sleeved, bright turquoise dress. The small, cramped room made it impossible for her to see more than a part of it.

'Does nothing for your complexion ... that,' the mirror's ancient voice quipped.

Hermione sighed. As if she didn't know already. It wasn't her colour, and the high, modest neckline didn't help either. The pink dress with the tight-laced bodice she had tried on at Madam Malkin's on the other hand...

She had liked what she had seen in the shop's mirror and the way the dress had hugged her body, but as both Molly and Ginny had been quick to point out, she couldn't wear pink as it would clash with Ron's hair, and besides, she wouldn't want to create the wrong impression by showing off her cleavage like this, would she? Especially not on an occasion like this. Hermione sighed again. *Of course not.* Besides, Ron already knew what was under her dress.

She shook her head and then quickly fastened on the gold necklace, a present from her parents. Everything was fine. She was really lucky. She had survived the war. She had a great job, she was about to become one of the youngest ever members of the Wizengamot, and she would marry her best friend, who loved her dearly. That was what mattered. She swallowed to get rid of the lump in her throat.

The door flew open, and Ginny came rushing in, wearing a dark purple dress. Its thin sequined straps nicely accentuated the pale skin of her shoulders. She beamed at Hermione. 'Ready?'

Without waiting for an answer, she turned and rushed out again. Unused to her heels, Hermione followed her a bit more slowly down the rickety stairs of The Burrow to where Harry and Ron were already waiting for them. Harry picked up Ginny and swirled her around once before he gave her long kiss. Ron grinned and quickly hugged Hermione. When Ginny decidedly nudged him in the ribs with her elbow, he said, 'You look very nice.'

As usual, Hermione pretended not to notice Ginny's non-too-subtle hint and smiled at Ron. 'Thank you; you look nice, too.'

Harry held out the empty cereal box that had been turned into a Portkey. 'Right, let's go then or we'll miss the speeches.'

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The Ministry had decided to host the annual ceremony and ball in honour of the victory over Voldemort at Hogwarts. The Great Hall was crowded with people, and everybody wanted to exchange a few words or at least a greeting with Harry. As she followed the other three to an empty table, Hermione quickly grabbed a glass of champagne from one of the trays that were floating through the room. She downed it in one gulp, set it down and took another full flute with her to the table.

They had just sat down and were waiting for Kingsley to begin the ceremony when Ginny suddenly made a face as if she had found something unpleasant stuck on the sole of her shoe and said, 'Ugh, look who's here.'

Hermione followed her line of vision and saw Draco Malfoy standing at the back of the hall, an extremely pretty blonde woman at his side. Before she could say anything, a bell began to toll five times and a hushed silence descended over the room.

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Lucius Malfoy was casually leaning against a table in the background, surveying the people seated throughout the Great Hall. He mentally ticked off the guest list. Everyone who had been in some way involved with the victory over Voldemort was here. Most importantly, he was here, too. If people doubted his integrity they knew better than to say so. A cold, satisfied smile briefly flitted across his face. His eyes swept lazily through the room to fall upon Potter, his young wife and their friends. It looked like yet more Weasleys would be populating the world soon. His nose, which had started to wrinkle in distaste, positively scrunched up when he saw Miss Granger. That dress she was wearing was an abomination. Someone should have told her that turquoise made her look like Ophelia after several days in the water. On the other hand, the dress tied right in with the company she kept, but why would she hide her rather nice figure in that way?

She was also downing two glasses of champagne in rapid succession. How very interesting. Lucius took a sip from his own glass and once again wrinkled his nose in distaste. Whoever had been in charge of the evening's drinks deserved to be rewarded with a round of *Crucio* for their lack of taste.

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Hermione shifted in her seat and looked through the Great Hall. A number of couples were dancing to the slow waltz currently playing. She could discern Harry and Ginny among them. Both of them were so obviously radiating with happiness that Hermione couldn't help but smile despite the tiny pang she felt at seeing them. Letting her eyes wander further, she saw Ron standing in a corner, talking to George and a couple of his friends. They all had bottles of beer in their hands and were roaring with laughter. She shifted in her seat again. George caught her eye and whispered something into Ron's ear, causing Ron to reluctantly turn and walk over to their table. He plunked down in the chair next to Hermione and took a long draught from his bottle before he said, 'It's great, isn't it? Everybody is here; it's almost like being back at school, but nobody can tell us off now.'

Ignoring the lump that had decided to reassert itself in her throat, Hermione quickly grabbed another glass of champagne from a tray floating nearby. 'Yes, it's lovely.'

Ron grinned at her. 'See that's what I like so much about you. You're not like other girls; you are almost like a bloke; you never make a fuss.'

Hermione quickly downed her glass of champagne, enjoying the feeling of the bubbly liquid running down her throat.

'Miss Granger, would you grant me the honour of a dance?' a somewhat familiar voice drawled.

Hermione let her eyes slowly travel up the impeccable, first-quality charcoal grey dress robes and the strands of perfectly groomed white blond hair until she looked into the silver eyes of Lucius Malfoy.

'Of course she won't, now sod off,' Ron cut in.

Hermione glared at Ron before turning back to Lucius, who hadn't so much as raised an eyebrow at Ron's behaviour. 'With pleasure,' Hermione said, standing up and allowing Lucius to guide her onto the dance floor while Ron stared after them, open-mouthed.

When the music started again, she felt the lightest of touches at her back. Hermione smiled at Lucius and let him lead her into the dance. The touch of his hands was barely noticeable as he stirred them through the crowded dance floor, yet for some reason it made her skin tingle underneath her robes. Hermione relaxed into the music and their movement, feeling that her partner knew what he was doing and that it was unlikely that they would either bump into another couple or that he would step onto her feet.

'You are a good dancer,' she said.

'Thank you, Miss Granger. One needs an adequate partner to shine, though.' He smiled at her.

Of course the legendary Malfoy charm was on full-force. To be on the receiving end of it didn't feel at all bad ... on the contrary. Hermione smiled back and relaxed further into the dance.

'So, how come you are here? I didn't think...' Hermione's question trailed out. *I didn't think an ex-Death Eater like you would be invited or even care to be here.*

That smile again. 'Ah, I have to thank your friend Mr Potter for that. He made it very clear that the assistance of my late wife was of considerable help to him in the final stages of the war. So, it is really on her behalf and in her honour that I am attending this function today.'

*And of course attending a Ministry function and being seen dancing with one of Potter's best friends will significantly add to your recently restored reputation* She didn't mind. He really was a good dancer, and a part of her shocked herself by being quite pleased for having got one over Ron. 'I am sure she would appreciate your gesture very much. By the way, I was very sorry to hear about your wife's death. My condolences.'

'Thank you.' They continued to dance in silence for a while before Lucius asked the next question. 'So, I take it from the notice in the *Daily Prophet* that congratulations will soon be in order?'

What was he on about now? 'Congratulations?'

Was that amusement in his grey eyes? 'Congratulations on your betrothal and impending marriage to Mr Weasley.'

Bugger, that had just slipped her mind. 'Oh, yes. Thank you. Molly ... that is, Ron's mum ... has suggested that we get married in July. She says summer weddings are just so beautiful.'

Lucius's eyes narrowed a bit. 'And you don't agree?'

'I haven't really thought that much about it. What with my new job at the Ministry and everything.' Again she felt something constricting in her chest, trying to block her breathing.

'Which department are you working for?'

'I used to work in Care and Regulation of Magical Creatures, but I have just started at Magical Law Enforcement; it's fascinating, I really love it.'

Lucius smiled. 'Yes, the intricacies of Law and its uses are fascinating indeed.'

As they continued to dance, Hermione's mind wandered off. It was remarkable how comfortable it felt dancing with Lucius, considering who he was.

She didn't notice that the music had stopped until Lucius's hands dropped away from her. She suddenly felt bereft, as if she had lost something precious, and for some reason the ground felt a bit wobbly.

They stood, facing each other when the music started again in a slow, sensual tune. Hermione looked at Lucius, a question in her eyes.

'May I?' he asked, and when she nodded, placed his hands again on her back and her arm, drawing her a bit closer than strictly necessary and led her into the next dance.

His eyes held hers as they began to move slowly in tune with the music. Caught in his gaze, Hermione was acutely aware of his hands, the closeness of his body and his scent. He smelled of an expensive, slightly spicy aftershave and something that was uniquely him. The tingling sensation she had felt from the touch of his hands earlier now started to spread through her body, bringing with it a little tugging in her lower belly.

They didn't speak as they danced; instead, Lucius drew her a little closer still and inclined his head towards her. She tilted her head a bit upward. They were so close now; she could feel his breath on her skin. His lips were nearly touching hers, only a fraction of an inch... only...

And then the music stopped. Coming abruptly back to reality, Hermione quickly stepped away from Lucius, nearly tripping over the hem of her robes in her haste. 'Thank you for the dance, Mr Malfoy.'

'You are welcome,' Lucius said and took her arm to steady her before he accompanied her back to the table. Ron was nowhere to be seen.

'It seems I might enjoy the pleasure of your company for a bit longer, Miss Granger.'

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A/N: This story was begun as challenge response. It has veered far away from the original prompt, but I'd still like to acknowledge the part of the prompt that asked for Hermione receiving an anonymous letter together with a Portkey and thus provided the inspiration for this fic.

## Two

### *Chapter 2 of 4*

After the war, not all is well as people are trying to get on with their lives. When two former enemies meet again, things start to take unexpected twists and turns...

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*Nine months later.*

Hermione yawned and stretched comfortably before she pointed her ash wand at the tea pot to refill it. Snuggling into the well-worn sofa, she looked around her living room. The table in front of her held the remnants of her breakfast, a newspaper and a couple of books. More books, which hadn't found a space on the overflowing shelves, were strewn throughout the room, keeping company with a quill, a few spare bits of parchment and a little woollen mouse. Hermione watched her black cat play with the sunbeams that came in through the window. He rolled around on his back, lazily batting at the rays of light. Hermione smiled and remembered how she had found him on a rainy evening last summer. He had crouched low in a dark corner of Diagon Alley, hissing and spitting when she had tried to approach him; a scruffy little fur ball ... all bones and attitude. She had left him a bit of her sandwich and had come back at lunchtime the next day to look for him. The evening had seen her again in Diagon Alley, as had the day after that until it had become a habit.

*'Are you coming to the game tonight?' Ron asked, rushing into her office and stopping right in front of her desk.*

*Hermione put down the parchment she had been reading before she answered, 'I'd love to, but I'm sorry; I can't.'*

*'But why? I checked your diary, you're free tonight.' He seemed completely unperturbed by the look on Hermione's face.*

*Hermione stared at her fiancé for a second before she answered, 'Excuse me, did you just say you checked my diary?'*

*Apparently, Ron still had no idea that something was just going pear-shaped. 'Yeah, Mum suggested it. Because y'know you're always busy, and I wanted to find out what was going on.'*

*Hermione had trouble to keep from yelling. 'And it never occurred to you to use your own head and simply ask me?'*

*Something flickered quickly over Ron's face before he said, 'But you just always go on about that cat.'*

*'Because that's what I'm doing. He'll die if he's left out there for much longer.' How could Ron not understand how important this was?*

*'But it's just a cat and ...' Ron never got around to finishing his sentence.*

*'Yes, Ronald. It's just a cat. Just another meaningless life; just another pointless death. Like Dobby's, like Colin's, like Snape's.' Hermione's voice had become dangerously low and controlled, each word as sharp as a needle.*

*It took Ron a few seconds to come up with an answer. 'You know, I didn't mean that. If it's that important to you, I'll go with you we'll find your cat.' As usual, when he didn't know what else to say, he put his arms around Hermione, drawing her close to him.*

*For a moment, she gave in. His embrace felt so warm and familiar around her, and they had been through so much together. Then, Hermione looked at him and it wasn't right. She took a step back. 'No, thanks, Ron. Go to your game. I need some time on my own.'*

*Silence. Then, in a very small voice. 'This isn't just about tonight, is it?'*

*'No.'*

*'But why? We make such a great couple. Everyone says so. And you're my best friend.'*

*'That's exactly it. We're friends or at least we used to be, but the rest is never going to work. It's just not.'*

*Ron looked honestly puzzled now. 'But, but why? I mean ... I know I can be at bit of an idiot sometimes, but I really like you, y'know.'*

*'I like you, too. It's just ... All we ever do is fight.'*

*'Don't you think that'll be different? I mean once we're married?' For a moment it looked as if Ron wanted to take Hermione's hand before he apparently thought better of it.*

*'Honestly Ron, how do you think it's going to be different?'*

*'Dunno, but all the others seem to get along fine. Like Bill and Fleur, or Harry and Ginny. They got married and it's great. Maybe it's because they have kids.'*

*Hermione sighed. 'No, Ron. It doesn't work that way. I don't want to get married yet, and I certainly don't want to start thinking about kids. Not for a while at least.'*

*Ron brightened up. 'We can wait. Mum says all women want babies eventually. And I don't mind you working.'*

*The very familiar lump in her throat the one that tended to take up residence there whenever the Weasleys and their attitudes towards the world at large and her in particular were mentioned was back, accompanied by a dull pain in her neck and shoulders. Hermione gritted her teeth. Obviously it was time to spell things out.*

*'You haven't listened. I. Don't. Want. To. Marry. You. And besides I am so fucking sick and tired of constantly hearing "Mum this" and "Mum that". I am sick and tired of trying to cater to Molly's and Ginny's wishes. I can't do it right anyway. I'll never be a proper housewife and I don't care. Have you ever really looked at me, ever really listened to me? Ever noticed what it is I care about? I don't think so.'* She had stood up and her voice had risen with every word.

*Ron had taken a step back, staring wide-eyed at her. 'But ... Hermione...'*

*'Just go. Please.'*

*It wasn't until the door had closed behind him when she noticed the tears streaming down her face. The lump in her throat was gone.*

It had taken all of Hermione's lunch breaks, most of her evenings and lots of little titbits for two weeks until the kitten had finally let her touch him and take him up. A visit to a magical veterinarian had shown that there wasn't anything wrong with the little fellow. All he had needed were a few good meals and a bit of love, both of which Hermione had been happy to provide.

As if reading her thoughts, the cat jumped up on the sofa and stalked over to her. He sniffed at the newspaper with an air of deep disdain, making Hermione grin. With his gangly limbs, dark fur that always appeared ill groomed and a face that looked as if the cat was constantly scowling ... if cats were able to do such a thing ... he would never qualify as "cute", but he was the best companion she could wish for. At least this was one life she had been able to save. She poured herself another cup, added a bit of milk and buried her nose in the Sunday edition of the *Daily Prophet*.

Hermione perused the editorial; it discussed possible changes in the legislation against former Death Eaters. She sighed as she remembered that the first hearings were set in a few weeks. There was no hope that these would take place without tremendous attention from all the wizarding media.

An impatient tapping at the window interrupted her train of thought. She looked up to see an elegant eagle owl hovering outside in the February gale. After Hermione had opened the window, the owl swooped onto her rickety coffee table and held out its leg so that Hermione could untie the roll of parchment attached there. The haughty look the owl cast around clearly implied that her flat was way beneath its usual standards. Intently watched by a pair of kitty eyes, it nevertheless accepted a piece of toast from Hermione before it flew off through the still open window.

Hermione quickly ran her wand over the roll of parchment on her table. No sign of anything sinister. *Never hurts to be vigilant*, she thought as she carefully untied the silver ribbon. The white parchment was of the very best quality available, the flourishing handwriting on it unfamiliar to her. The letter was wrapped around a snowy white rose: not only its petals were of the purest white but also its stem and its leaves. Its beauty spoke of winter, of ice, of glittering snow.

*Dear Miss Granger,*

*Please forgive my frankness in addressing you thus, but our previous contact has sparked the hope in me that you may not be entirely indifferent to my attentions. May I be so bold as to request the pleasure of your company for dinner on Friday?*

*If you are agreeable to my suggestion, all you have to do is to touch the rose at seven in the evening; it will take you to your destination.*

*With kindest regards,*

*Your admirer*

Hermione stared at the letter before her. Who did she know who would write such a letter? And more importantly, who would write such a letter to her? Was this someone's idea of a joke? What if it wasn't? Most of her male acquaintances were either married or seeing someone. Of those who were single, none had seemed to be particularly interested in her. So who could it be? Should she go? Take a Portkey to an unknown destination to meet a stranger? What if it was a trap? There were enough of Voldemort's supporters still around who would consider the world a better place without her. Not to mention a few people who had paid hefty fines or spent a bit of time in Azkaban thanks to her. But neither would be that transparent. Yet some stranger taking a fancy to her sounded too much like the plot of a bad romance novel. Though the letter spoke of previous contact. Nobody she knew owned an eagle owl. Unless...

No, impossible. Wishful thinking at best ... which in itself was so wrong on so many levels. Hermione reminded herself once more who the man was and what he had done.

But why had he asked her to dance? And why had she danced with him? That one was easy to answer: because she had been more than a little tipsy and annoyed at Ron. And why did he have to dance so well, and smell so nice, and... A little wistful sigh escaped Hermione as her hand crept inside her dressing gown, slowly wandering over her body and finally finding its way into her knickers.

*Enchanting music seemed to come from nowhere, always the same slow seductive tune. They were dancing all alone in a beautiful garden. The night air was warm, filled with the fragrance of lush summer flowers. His silver eyes never left hers as he held her close and slowly lowered his lips to hers. Hermione willingly opened her mouth to him. They took their time, deepening the kiss. Neither noticed that they had stopped dancing. Lucius's hands tangled into Hermione's hair, one of them coming up to the back of her neck. A little moan escaped her in response to his kiss, and she leant closer into his body, her hands wandering over his back and further down.*

*They had found a secluded spot under the trees. Lucius whispered a cushioning charm and carefully lowered her to the ground, never breaking the kiss. Hands found their way into robes, touching and exploring warm naked skin. They took their time in getting acquainted with each other's bodies, slowly getting rid of restricting garments. After*

*the last item of clothing ... her knickers ... had disappeared, Hermione was lying on top of Lucius, stroking his flawless body and kissing her way down the side of his neck, along his collarbones, and over his flat stomach. When she had reached the trail of blond hair that led to an even more interesting area, she looked up at him, pleased with the entranced expression on his face. He smiled as he pulled her back up. Now she was left to enjoy as he trailed kissed over her breasts and flicked his tongue over her nipples. His hot mouth on her was sweet and his touch left little delicious flames on her skin in its wake, causing her to moan and squirm above him, seeking more and more contact and friction. Hermione moved down a bit, positioning herself carefully, until she could feel him exactly where she wanted him. She teased for a bit, relishing the delectable noises this produced from him before she slid down, and savoured the exquisite feeling of him filling her. She then stayed completely still for a moment, just looking into his eyes. The fingers of one of his hands entwined with hers as she began to move slowly. Their rhythm soon became more heated as Lucius pulled her towards him a bit, taking one of her nipples into his mouth again. It didn't take long for waves of pleasure to wash over the both of them.*

*Afterwards they lay for a long time, not saying anything, just holding each other, feeling warm and comfortable in their embrace.*

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Lucius Malfoy quickly downed the contents of the potion vial, relief soon spreading through his body. He took a sip of the scorching hot black coffee before he started to read the *Daily Prophet* on Sunday's gossip column, which these days was titled *What the Beetle Saw*. His attendance at the opening of the new St Mungo's wing had been duly noted. The article also mentioned his generous donation and speculated about the pretty woman who had accompanied him. Excellent. He leafed through the rest of the articles, filtering out the information he could use to his advantage.

Lucius rubbed his eyes and carefully flexed his left leg. Maybe a massage would make him feel better; or a night of uninterrupted sleep, come to think of it. But his bed was too large, too empty, too cold.

Perhaps he should have taken Cathy ... or was it Katy? ... home with him yesterday, but he never brought anyone back to the manor. Or he could have stayed at her place. The encounter had been pleasant enough, and she hadn't been one of those women who had the weirdest ideas about what an alleged ex-follower of the Dark Lord would get up to in bed. Not for the first time, he wondered where that rumour about certain Dark revels had started. No, all in all it had been a nice evening, yet the idea to see Katy's ... or was it Kerry's? ... face when he woke up had held no appeal for him. As had become his habit, he had waited until she had fallen asleep, disentangled himself carefully from her arms, quickly cast a whispered *Obliviate* on her and left.

His look fell upon the picture of Narcissa that had a place of honour on the mantelpiece. She smiled warmly at him as she had done every morning for so many years. Suddenly the house seemed to be even emptier than before.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a slight movement before his house-elf stood next to his chair. 'What?' Lucius snapped.

Silently, the elf held out a tray with a roll of parchment on it. Odd, he thought as he untied the silver ribbon. What was so urgent that it couldn't wait until Monday?

*Dear Mr Malfoy,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. Please don't think me presumptuous, but I would very much like to see you again. Would you care to have dinner with me on Friday?*

*The rose is a Portkey. If you touch it at seven on the night of the seventeenth, it will take you to your destination. I very much hope to see you there.*

*Longingly yours*

A completely white rose lay innocuously inside the parchment. Lucius smiled. So some unknown woman was asking him to dine with her and probably more. That was a bit more interesting than the veiled and not-so-veiled invitations and offers he usually received. Who might she be? Probably she was married to someone else and wished to remain anonymous. He pictured a clandestine little tête-à-tête with a masked woman. Somehow the prospect failed to intrigue him as much as it would have a year ago.

On the other hand it could also be a trap. Regrettably he wasn't yet as respected again as he had been, so some people might be inclined to think that they could trifle with him.

Yet something about the letter didn't fit either picture. The parchment was of solid good quality, but not the kind the women of his circle would use; neither was the style. It probably was a little ruse to veil her identity. Unless...

No, not likely. Someone like her would sign a letter. A young woman with serious brown eyes and a vast amount of bushy hair. Incredibly strong and loyal, even as her body had been contorting under Bella's curses. Intelligent and resourceful. Would Potter ever have defeated the Dark Lord without her? Highly unlikely. Fierce, determined and powerful in a fight as she'd been running through the chaos of the final battle, firing hexes and curses with precision and might. In many ways so much like Narcissa, and yet so different.

Lucius almost let a little sigh escape his lips and then quickly checked to make sure that nobody, not even a house-elf was around. He wouldn't be caught pining after a woman, especially not that woman.

*A light flowery scent wafted into his nose as he was holding her warm body. They slowly danced and she leant easily into his touch. She allowed him to draw her closer and willingly melded her soft curves against his body, inviting his hands to explore her. Her mouth looked so enticing, just waiting to be kissed...*

His trousers suddenly uncomfortably tight, Lucius decided to relocate to the privacy of his bedroom for a while.

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Hermione stood before her floor-length mirror and turned around. The pale pink accentuated her natural skin tone perfectly, and the tight bodice hugged her upper body nicely. Maybe she was a bit overdressed, but she had waited for an occasion to wear this dress ever since she had bought it as a present to herself last summer. She wrapped a shawl around her shoulders, took her handbag and checked that she had her wand before she went into her living room, the mirror whistling appreciatively after her. Picking up the rose, she waited for the familiar tugging behind her navel that would signal that the Portkey had activated.

## Three

*Chapter 3 of 4*

After the war, not all is well as people are trying to get on with their lives. When two former enemies meet again, things start to take unexpected twists and turns...

*The HP universe belongs to JKR, I only borrow. Can I keep Lucius?*

*Many thanks for all their comments, help, and encouragement to my fabulous betas Anogete and Dacian Goddess. Special thanks go to Chivalric for her support and a number of very inspiring conversations that involved Switzerland, snow, food, and beautiful male bodies, though not necessarily in that order.*

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Hermione waited a few seconds until the world around her stopped spinning. She carefully moved one of her feet, testing the ground. Definitely solid. And cold. Before she had time to take a look at her surroundings, a soft noise alerted her to the arrival of another person. Training, experience and habit kicked in, and she whirled around, drawing her wand without thinking twice about it, only to find herself facing Lucius Malfoy. Though she had speculated or even hoped that it might be him, coming face to face, or rather wand to wand, with the object of her fantasies caused a torrent of contradictory emotions to wash over her in rapid succession: happiness, a trace of fear, a flicker of desire and anticipation.

They stared at each other for a few seconds before they lowered their wands.

'You,' Hermione said, wishing she'd come up with a more elegant opening while she admired the way he looked. Those dark grey robes went well with his hair and eyes. She briefly wondered if he had made that choice deliberately in memory of their last encounter. So maybe she wasn't the only one who had dressed for the occasion. She didn't fail to notice the appreciative glance he cast at her pink dress, either.

'And good evening to you too, Miss Granger. And why would you be surprised to see me, considering that you sent me an invitation?' Lucius managed to sound ever so slightly hurt.

Lucius had received an invitation as well? Something didn't add up here. 'But you sent me a letter. Or at least someone did.' Her mind quickly tried to work through the problem. 'Hm, I most certainly didn't send you anything, and if you didn't either ...'

'... then it appears that someone else must have.' Lucius finished the sentence for her.

They looked at each other for a moment before they slowly started to take in their surroundings. They were standing at the edge of a little square on what appeared to be a plateau near the top of a mountain. It was lit by torches that were strategically placed around it to give off just enough light without spoiling the mood. The square, like the world around them, was covered in deep snow. By daylight the view would have to be spectacular. As it was, with the clear, dark sky above them and the snow that dampened every sound, they seemed to be all alone in an eerily beautiful world ... save for the small building that was visible on the other side of the square. The flicker of fear Hermione had felt earlier had decided to go back to sleep, at least for now.

Despite its isolation, the place felt friendly; or did it feel friendly because she wasn't alone here after all? No point musing about that now; better evaluate the situation. A look at Lucius confirmed that he was trying to assess their circumstances as well. That didn't exclude the possibility that he had set this up yet, just because he pretended not to. But if he was indeed behind this, he certainly hid it well. Nothing less than she expected of a man who had managed to wriggle out of being sent to Azkaban twice.

As if on cue, they both went and inspected the small building. It had the structure of a small wooden chalet, its windows alight with a warm glow. It looked like an ordinary if luxurious holiday home ... or would have if not for the small brass plaque next to the door. Lucius raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything as he looked at the inscription, his wand still in his hand.

Hermione tried to read his carefully neutral expression. 'Do you have any idea where we are? What this place is?'

No answer; only his eyes quickly flicking in her direction before they focussed on the door again were any indication that he had heard her questions. Hermione followed his look and deciphered the inscription on the little plate. She drew a deep breath. She had always thought that *Le coeur du dragon* was merely a myth, a place whispered about in drunken conversations. It was said to be a restaurant so exclusive that it had become legend even among the most affluent, most of whom couldn't even broker an introduction.

'How very interesting,' Lucius said softly.

Of course, he had been here before. It figured. She shivered in her thin evening dress; the cold mountain air called for thick woollen winter cloaks, preferably lined with something furry, not the thin elegant shawl she had wrapped around her shoulders. She could cast a warming charm, but her patience was wearing thin. 'Do you have any idea what is going on here?'

'Possibly,' Lucius answered, his face carefully guarded.

'What is this, then?' Hermione asked. It was obvious that he knew or suspected something, and she wanted to bloody well know what it was. She twirled her wand ever so slightly in his direction.

Lucius didn't react to her impatient tone or her subtle threat. Instead, he seemed to have come to some sort of conclusion. 'If my suspicions are correct, then it would appear that we are not in any immediate danger.' With these cryptic words, he took a step towards the door.

Hermione, though, didn't follow his lead. If he thought she would play along with his little scheme, he was in for a surprise. There was, of course, the possibility that this wasn't his game. Still, if he had any idea what was going on, she certainly didn't.

'So?' Hermione remained standing exactly where she was.

'Why don't we discuss this over dinner,' Lucius answered, his voice back to its usual smooth tones.

'What makes you think there'll be dinner? If you know anything, I suggest you tell me. Now. For all I know we could be in all kinds of trouble.' Hermione insisted. If he knew where they were, why didn't he tell her? What was he trying to keep from her?

Seemingly unperturbed by Hermione's glare, Lucius took the time to adjust his grey leather gloves before he chose to answer Hermione's question. 'Very well. It looks like someone has made dinner plans for us. A rather exclusive arrangement.'

Hermione translated exclusive correctly as "expensive" and "difficult to get" when the words "us" and "dinner" registered. 'Right, but I don't see ... Oh.'

Lucius nodded, nothing but polite interest visible in his patrician features. 'Exactly.'

'You mean someone has arranged this ... dinner for us.' At the thought of spending an entire evening with Lucius, the flicker of fear briefly sparked again before a delicious little flutter shoved it resolutely out of the way and took up residence in her stomach.

'So it would appear.' Lucius drawled.

'But why? And why you and me? Who would do such a thing? And what for?'

A corner of Lucius's mouth had started to twitch ever so slightly at Hermione's barrage of questions. 'I don't know, Miss Granger. But since we are here, I suggest we take the opportunity offered while we think about who might have arranged this.'

Exactly which opportunity was he talking about? Hermione decided not to pursue this specific question right now. She could just turn around and find a way home. The little flutter folded its wings, disappointed. Or she could stay and find out what this was all about. Here. With him. The little flutter raised a hopeful head. Hermione nodded, not quite trusting her voice.

As if it had seen her, the door in front of them opened, and the house-elf behind it, dressed in a pristine white tea towel, bowed so deeply that his nose nearly touched the floor. 'Soyez les bienvenus,' he said, leading them into the foyer where another elf took Lucius's cloak and gloves as well as Hermione's shawl. She could feel Lucius's eyes on her bare shoulders as the first elf lead them down a short corridor into the dining room. It didn't hold more than ten tables, placed at a comfortable distance from each other to give the guests some privacy. Hardly any conversation could be heard, and Hermione suspected that there were *Muffliato*-like charms around the tables to ensure that the guests' conversation couldn't be overheard. The roughly hewn grey stone walls contrasted nicely with the pristine white of the tablecloths and the silver candlesticks, giving the room a rustic yet elegant appearance, which was increased by the soft, warm light that infused the room despite no other source of light being visible than the candles on the table.

The elf led Lucius and Hermione to a table that was situated at one of the windows looking out over the valley covered in snow and bowed again. As soon as they were seated, two glasses of champagne appeared in front of them, accompanied by a dish of asparagus and scallops.

Hermione surveyed the arrangement on the table and swallowed. Asparagus. And Champagne. Whoever had arranged this was apparently trying to pave the way for something other than just a bit of polite conversation. As she reached for her glass with a slightly shaky hand, she tried to ignore the little flutter in her belly that had obviously decided to be her constant companion this evening.

Lucius raised his glass to her, smiling. 'To unexpected pleasures.'

Hermione swallowed again. 'To unexpected pleasures,' she answered.

They both sipped at their champagne. The bubbly liquid running down her throat still felt nice. In fact drinking it slowly here felt much better than downing it quickly at the Ministry's reception last year.

She looked at the asparagus, wondering whether there was any scientific base to its reputation or whether it was just a myth. Maybe not the best way to open a conversation right now. She looked at Lucius, casting around for a subject, something that wouldn't be too blunt or too personal, but found herself distracted by the curve of his mouth.

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Lucius caught her eyes lingering on his mouth. He pretended not to notice, but made sure that Hermione had something to look at while he slowly continued eating, taking the occasion to look her over as well. The tight bodice of her dress allowed him a good view of her cleavage while the colour nicely accentuated the flawless skin of her shoulders and neck. He imagined its soft, warm feel under his hands when his gaze was arrested by the tiny scar on her throat. The kind of scar that was left by a very sharp blade. His left leg started twitching, and the asparagus suddenly tasted like mouldy straw. He quickly took a sip of champagne to wash the foul taste away.

'I take it then, Miss Granger, you didn't arrange this little soirée,' he said, his tone well-practised, a friendly but disinterested enquiry.

'No, I received your invitation; well, what I thought was your invitation. An anonymous letter and a Portkey.' Large brown eyes focused on his now.

She had thought he had sent her a letter inviting her and she had accepted. Before an unnamed and unusual feeling could spread too far through his body, Lucius quickly reminded himself that there would be motives and hopes for advantages to be gained. There always were, and everything depended on anticipating those so he could make sure that they coincided with his own plans, even if said plans were as yet unformed.

'What did your Portkey look like?'

Hermione took a white rose out of her handbag. It looked exactly like the one he had received.

'Did you get a letter and a Portkey as well?'

Instead of answering, he produced his own rose from the folds of his robes, laying it silently next to hers on the table.

'And you thought I had sent the letter?' Was there a distinctive note of hope in her eyes and her voice?

'It was one possible conclusion, yes,' he admitted.

'Why?' Hermione's face held an expression that explained to Lucius how she had gained her reputation in both Magical Law Enforcement and the Wizengamot in only a few short months. It wouldn't do to forget that she could be a venerable enemy ... or ally if he played this right. He tried to ignore the voice that suggested that she could be something else as well. Something that involved warm, naked skin and her delicious mouth. Instead, he started to play with her rose on the table as he tried to decide how much he wanted to give away.

'A hunch,' he said vaguely.

'A hunch. You came here on a hunch?' It was evident that Hermione didn't believe him.

He tried a different approach. 'Why would I pass up the possible occasion to have dinner with a beautiful woman?'

The sight of her soft smile at his compliment sent a tiny, pleasant shiver down his spine. It was almost too easy.

But the distraction didn't last long. 'So, assuming I believe you, it seems neither of us sent these letters. Which brings us back to the initial question. Who did?'

While they were talking, their empty plates and glasses had disappeared, to be replaced minutes later by steaming seafood risotto and white wine.

Lucius realised that whoever had arranged this knew his taste in food well, but decided to keep this piece of information to himself for the moment.

'I have no idea, Miss Granger.' In fact he had a couple of ideas that ranged from very pleasant to those he'd rather not think about, but he first wanted to find out what the woman sitting across from him thought about this. Did she know what a delectable view her cleavage offered?

'Let's try this from a different angle. If we can solve the why we might come closer to the who.' Hermione suggested. She smiled, but her eyes remained serious.

Lucius swallowed a bite of the excellent risotto, quickly dispelling the fleeting images that involved various combinations of "angle" and Hermione's body with it, before he went along with her line of enquiry. 'Right, the most pertinent question seems to be why anybody would want us to spend an evening together. We are not exactly the most likely candidates to be thrown together like this.'

Hermione looked as if she was trying to suppress a snort. 'That, Mr Malfoy, qualifies as the understatement of the year.'

Of course; she had to rub it in. 'I thought we had a rather... pleasant encounter at last year's festivities.'

'Yes, that dance was very nice.' Suddenly Hermione's fork paused in mid-air. 'And there's one possible motive. After that, what do you think would happen if some nosy reporter saw us here? I can already see the headlines in the *Prophet*.'

Lucius nodded. 'Though this would only damage your name on various counts ... not mine,' he pointed out. 'Which would suggest that someone not only has a grudge against you, but is also completely unaware of the security measures *Le coeur* employs to ensure the privacy of its guests. An oversight which would be negligent at best.'

'I can think of quite a few people who would love to see my reputation in tatters. Hm, but none of them has either the means or the connections to arrange this. Somehow I think this whole set-up points more to your end.'

Lucius had come to a similar conclusion. 'You might have a point there. Which brings us back to why someone would throw us together. I find it hard to believe that anyone would actually be naïve enough to hope to gain something simply by forcing us to spend an evening together.'

They had finished their risotto while they were talking, and after their empty plates had vanished, the next course appeared on the table. Fillet of lamb. It smelled delicious, exactly like his favourite recipe. Lucius narrowed his eyes suspiciously; this was a bit too much of a coincidence. Whoever had arranged this knew his taste in food extremely well. Too well. Something about the whole arrangement and its set-up niggled at the back of his mind. He tasted the dark red wine that had come with the lamb. It was one of his favourite vintages. Very few people knew his taste in wine. Slowly a suspicion began to form in his head.

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Who said someone was hoping to gain something from this? Maybe they, whoever "they" were, hoped for something nasty to happen. Something naughty more likely judging by the whole set-up. But if she told him that he would surely take her observation as some kind of innuendo. Which of course it wasn't. She was just putting her famous analytical mind to good use. Right? And why had Lucius become so quiet since the next course had appeared on the table?

He took a sip of the dark red liquid in his glass, looking thoughtful. 'I don't think we'll be solving this now. It would be a shame to waste such an excellent meal with idle speculation. I suggest we enjoy the evening instead. Have you been to Switzerland before?'

Now, there was a quick change of topic. Interesting. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to play along with his suggestion, see what she could find out. Besides, she really didn't have a better idea. 'No, I've only been to the French part of the Alps. My parents used to take me skiing there. Usually over Christmas.' Hermione quickly quelled the wave of sadness that threatened to engulf her as she was talking about her parents. 'Do you know Switzerland well?'

'Reasonably. There are a couple of very nice resorts around here. Narcissa loved the mountains very much.' For a fleeting moment his expression looked sad as he mentioned his late wife, but it passed so quickly that Hermione wasn't sure if she'd really seen anything. 'Skiing?'

'It's a Muggle sport. You put small planks beneath your feet and glide down a mountain slope. If you are good at it, you can go very fast,' Hermione said hesitantly. Would his prejudices now make an entrance?

'That sounds ... entertaining. Are you good at it, Miss Granger?' Lucius expression was again carefully neutral.

It seemed he was trying to be nice. Whatever his motive for it, Hermione almost smiled. 'No. I don't like it very much. In fact I like summer and the sea much better than snow and mountains.'

'As do I. Have you been to other parts of France?'

'I used to go there on holiday with my parents; first to Provence and then, when I was a bit older, to Brittany. It's very beautiful. I love it there. Have you ever been to either?' Hermione took a sip of wine.

'Actually I happen to know both quite well. My family originates from France. We still own property in some parts. Did you know that there is a long and intriguing history of wizardry in France?' Lucius looked at her enquiringly.

'Yes, I went to see some of the places when I was there the last time, and I found some old books in a shop there. It's fascinating.' Could he really be interested in the history of magic?

'Have you read Lagarde? That's usually considered the standard work. He's quite thorough in his research, but some of his arguments are slightly absurd,' Lucius said.

Hermione nodded. 'I've read all his works on European history. Actually I found some of his ideas quite interesting.' While she was speaking their empty plates once again vanished and were replaced by a cheese board. She started to absent-mindedly nibble at a piece of Gruyère as she listened to Lucius explaining his opinion of the books. His eyes lit up in a very nice way when he was speaking about something he seemed to be passionate about.

They proceeded to discuss the finer points of wizarding history, agreeing on some points while disagreeing on many others. For the first time in her life Hermione had found someone who could not only keep up with her, but was well-read and had fascinating points and opinions of his own to contribute. At some point in their discussion, "Miss Granger" became Hermione, and "Mr Malfoy" became Lucius without either of them noticing. They were still talking long after their espresso cups were as empty as the glasses that had held the fine cognac they'd had as digestif. Neither of them wanted the evening to end, and only when they finally couldn't find any more pretext to linger, did they get up to leave.

Lucius took the shawl from the elf in the cloakroom and arranged it carefully around her shoulders, his hands lingering for a moment on her naked skin, so short that it was barely noticeable, yet it was enough to send a tingle through her body right down to her lower belly.

The elf had handed them a note with another rose, this one dark red, wrapped inside it. The note read:

*Hopefully your evening was enjoyable. Whenever you are ready tap the rose with a wand. Saying the Portus spell will enable you to go where you want.*

Lucius quickly dissolved any awkwardness by saying, 'Allow me to see you safely home, Hermione.'

'That is very kind of you,' Hermione answered, taking out her wand. With a quick tap and a whispered, *Portus*, she concentrated on the image of the door to her flat. The rose briefly glowed in a blue light, and then the familiar tugging behind her navel signalled that the Portkey had activated.

They materialised at the landing in front of Hermione's flat. Not for the first time she was glad that she had chosen to live on the top floor so that nobody would see them appear out of nowhere. After the spinning had stopped, they stood for a long moment, just looking at each other until Hermione said, 'Thank you for a very nice evening, Lucius.'

'The pleasure is all mine,' he answered and took her hand. His lips ghosted over her knuckles and then he was gone.

## Four



After the war, not all is well as people are trying to get on with their lives. When two former enemies meet again, things start to take unexpected twists and turns...

*The HP universe belongs to JKR, I only borrow. Can I keep Lucius?*

*Many thanks to PajamaPants for the beta.*

*Additional thanks to Anogete, Chivalric and Dacian Goddess for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this chapter.*

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Lucius Apparated into the entrance hall at Malfoy Manor and threw his cloak and gloves towards the house-elf that had come running at his arrival. He strode into his study, picked up the potions vial that sat on a tray next to a glass of water and threw it forcefully into the fireplace, where it shattered with a very satisfying crunch. 'Damn.'

He quickly poured himself a glass of Firewhisky. He downed it in one gulp and poured another. Sitting down behind his desk, he stared at nothing in particular. After a few minutes, he got up again and started pacing in front of the window, when the trembling of his hands, combined with the sharp pain that seared through his left leg, made him aware that destroying the potions vial hadn't been one of his brighter ideas. He hurled the glass into the fireplace as well and watched as the flames soared upward, fuelled by the alcohol. He sat down again with a groan and took a large gulp directly from the bottle.

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Hermione took a sip of her herbal tea before she closed her eyes and leant back against the rim of her tub with a sigh. Rose-scented steam was rising in little spirals from the hot, foamy water. Her favourite bubble bath another of the presents she had bought for herself after the break-up with Ron. Her cat was perched on the shelf above the wash-basin, eyeing her curiously.

The events of the evening kept replaying in her head. It had been a nice dinner; very nice, in fact. True, they had come no closer to solving the puzzle of the mysterious arrangement, but the food had been excellent and Lucius had been perfectly pleasant. He had been charming. Who would have thought that he was interested in history? And intelligent, too. Hermione searched her memory for the last time she had had such an engaging discussion with anyone, but couldn't remember when or if ever. So he was bright, well-mannered, good-looking and charming. Not to mention that he had beautiful hair, an enticing mouth and eyes that sparkled in the nicest kind of way when he made a point he was passionate about. What would it be like to see him passionate about her? He seemed to have a very nice body under those dress robes as well. Hermione sighed.

She went through the catalogue of all the reasons why this was a really bad idea. He was a ruthless, arrogant bigot and had done things she didn't even want to begin thinking about. The trouble was that all the valid points she came up with were overlaid with the way he had smiled at her tonight, the clever things he had said, his eyes, the tone of his voice, how his hands had felt when he had draped her shawl around her, and the memory of his lips barely touching her knuckles in goodbye.

She wished she had someone to help her sort this mess out and see reason again. Hermione pictured Ginny's face if she told her that she feared she might be attracted to, of all people, Lucius Malfoy. Ginny would either think she was taking the mickey or send her straight to St Mungo's. Besides, Ginny and she didn't see eye to eye on a lot of things. The last time they had spoken, the other girl had tried to persuade her to give her relationship with Ron another go. She had nodded at everything Hermione had said as to why this wasn't a good idea. *'Yeah, but, y' know, Ron really likes you, despite...'*

*'Despite what?'*

Ginny had gone on to argue that Hermione should take Ron back because he was willing to put up with Hermione's "eccentricities", such as her love of learning, her thirst for knowledge and her plans to have a career...and could see beyond the fact that Hermione wasn't conventionally pretty. Hermione was still very proud that she had only laddered Ginny's tights with a neat, little, wordless spell instead of hexing her six ways to Sunday, but that conversation still rankled.

So, clearly, talking to Ginny was completely pointless. When had that changed? They used to be friends. Right after the war everything had been different. In the evenings Ginny, the boys and she used to sit around the old kitchen table in Grimmauld Place. They had chatted, played Exploding Snap or one of Hermione's Muggle board games. Kreacher had made sure that their supply of nibbles and tea or beer never stopped. Once, when they had been rather pissed, they had fantasised what it would be like to send their own children off to Hogwarts at King's Cross one day.

Obviously, that hadn't worked out. For a moment, her flat seemed very empty and way too quiet, and she missed the hubbub of the house she had shared with the others. It had felt safe. At least before everything fell apart, before Ron and she found they had nothing to talk about anymore and agreed about even less; before everything he did or said rubbed her the wrong way; before Molly had started constantly nagging them to get married; before she had been unable to make it through an evening without drinking too much in an effort to avoid screaming at everybody; before she had been unable to make it through the night without Dreamless Sleep Potion to keep the nightmares at bay.

A furry little head butted against her cheek, interrupting her train of thoughts and bringing her back to the present. She opened her eyes to see her black cat awkwardly balancing on the rim of the bathtub. Hermione smiled. 'It's all right. I'm fine. Don't fall in.'

As if he had understood her, he leapt gracefully back onto the shelf and curled his tail around his paws, still watching her. Suddenly feeling a lot better, Hermione decided that it was time to get out of the tub.

Later, snuggled up in bed under her warm duvet, Hermione remembered that she hadn't come any closer to finding out who had set her up with Lucius tonight. That thought was quickly forgotten while she wondered what it would be like to run her hands through that hair, to feel the silver-blond strands as they cascaded through her fingers.

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Lucius's eyes didn't want to open. They had a point; the day didn't like him. He pried them open anyway. The sodding light was piercing and far too bright. He quickly snapped his eyes shut again. A few minutes later, he tried again, very slowly opening first one and then the other. That was marginally better, though the light still seemed to cut right into his already aching head. His left leg felt as if it was on fire while a furry animal seemed to have taken up residence in his mouth. All in all, the world felt like a shitty place this morning. Very slowly, his surroundings came into focus, and he could make out two potions vials and a glass of water in front of him. His stomach decided that the sight of water was an excellent occasion for a few somersaults. Lucius waited until the wave of nausea had subsided and then downed both potions before he closed his eyes again, waiting for them to take effect.

Some time later, as the headache and the pain in his leg slowly subsided, he started to feel a bit better, but his brain was still fuzzy. He didn't remember why he was in a chair in his study. What had happened yesterday to make him sleep in his clothes? In a set of dress robes, no less. Lucius pondered this puzzle as he shuffled upstairs to take a shower and find clean clothes.

As the beam of hot water helped to clear the remnants of his headache away and massage his sore muscles into cooperation, a whole list of things to be taken care of was swimming back into his brain. One of them had a curvy body, large, beautiful brown eyes and incredible amounts of bushy hair. Lucius filed that particular problem away for later. Unfortunately, it turned out that those next on the list seemed all in some way or other to be connected to the first one. Damn. On the other hand, wriggling out of tricky situations or rather making sure that things were resolved to his advantage had always been one of his greatest talents. Most of the time, anyway.

Two cups of black coffee and a plate heaped with eggs, sausages and toast later, Lucius decided that it was time to have Draco and his wife round for a cosy little Sunday tea. He was on the way to his study to pen the respective missive when the entertainment section of the *Daily Prophet* caught his eye. He smiled as he took the paper with him. The world had just started to look a lot friendlier.

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'Astoria, dear, would you like to see the books on rose cultivation I was recently able to acquire?'

'Yes, thank you.' Astoria's face clearly indicated that she knew a dismissal when she heard one, even if it was couched in a tempting offer. Still, she rose with a smile and followed the house-elf to the library.

Lucius watched his daughter-in-law's retreating back, pleased with himself that his little manoeuvre had made Draco's wife happy and got her out of the way so that he could talk to his son in private.

When the door of the drawing room had closed behind Astoria, Lucius took a sip of his tea before he leant back comfortably in his arm chair. 'Her talent for horticulture is truly amazing,' he remarked.

Draco was still gazing after his wife. 'Yes, you should see her rose garden. Apart from mother, she's the only one who has ever managed to cultivate the *Reine de neige*,' he answered.

Lucius smiled. 'How interesting that you should mention that particular species, since someone sent me one of those recently. Remarkable coincidence, don't you think?'

Having learnt from the best, Draco apparently tried very hard to keep his face unreadable. 'Could be,' he murmured.

'And you'll never guess what came with it,' Lucius continued.

'Do tell.'

'An invitation to spend an evening at *Le Coeur du Dragon*' Lucius was watching his son closely.

Draco whistled through his teeth. 'Some bird must really fancy you. Who was she? Was she pretty?'

Lucius raised an eyebrow at his son's insolence. 'Actually, the *lady* in question received the same invitation as I did.'

'Weird.' Draco looked at his father, an expression of complete innocence on his face.

'It gets weirder. Not only did the menu contain a number of my favourite courses, the vintage served catered precisely to my taste. Now, how many people would you say, Draco, know my exact taste in wine?'

'A fair few?' Draco ventured.

'You, your mother, and Severus. I think we can rule out the latter two. That leaves you. Again a remarkable coincidence. One too many, wouldn't you say? And don't try "I have no idea what you're talking about" on me.'

Draco started fidgeting with his teaspoon, apparently playing for time before he came up with an answer.

'Well?' Lucius didn't need confirmation that his son was responsible for the events on Friday. He already knew, but what he didn't know was why.

'I wanted you to have a nice evening,' Draco said tentatively.

'I certainly appreciate the gesture, but why the clandestine set-up? And why Herm...Miss Granger? And do I want to know how you managed to get me a legal Portkey?'

Draco wouldn't be his son if he hadn't noticed his father's slip, and the little smirk on his face clearly showed he had. 'You don't want to know. And you seemed to like her well enough at the ball last year.'

'And that prompted your idea?' Lucius tried to hide his impatience with his son's elusive answers.

Draco didn't seem to notice that he was still twisting the teaspoon around in his hands. 'Yes. I mean no.' He sighed. 'I don't know how to say this without offending you, but I haven't seen you dancing with anyone like that. Not since...'

'I guess what I mean to say is, I want you to be happy. After everything that happened. You've been so lonely ever since Mother... And I thought maybe Granger could make you happy again, even if she's, well, you know; but I guess that doesn't matter anymore, does it?' He didn't look at his father when he finished his sentence.

Lucius didn't know what to say. Several things rushed through his head. Was that what that one single dance had looked like? Was Draco right? Was Hermione the witch to make him happy again? And was it really of no consequence that she was Muggle-born? Did he appear so miserable that Draco would go to any length to help him? Lucius glanced at his son, all grown-up now. He remembered the look in the eyes of the boy who had worshipped him. He had taken his son's adoration for granted as he had so many other things. Now, the same eyes were full of worry for him. They shouldn't be. Not yet.

His throat felt very tight. He swallowed a few times before he softly said, 'Thank you.'

Draco only nodded and both were quiet for a few moments. Lucius rose and poured them each a glass of brandy. The occasion seemed to warrant it.

They drank in silence before Draco asked hesitantly, 'Will you see her again?'

'I hope so,' Lucius answered with uncharacteristic honesty. 'You do know, though, that she might be one of the people to handle my case before the Wizengamot.'

'Bugger. No, I didn't know that. Do you think that could be problem?' The look he gave his father was an odd mixture of worry and calculation.

'Depends. If I play this right, it might come in handy.'