

Duel at Dusk

by duniazade

A hilltop in Provence, above a winery. Hermione Granger faces an implacable adversary. Severus Snape arbitrates.

Written for lillithj.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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"You can do it," Hermione sternly told herself.

Too bad she had to fight in enemy territory.

She firmed her stance and tried to take in the surroundings.

The long terrace, shadowed with plane trees and stone pines, covered almost the whole top of the hill, running from the mansion, which turned its back to the north and overlooked the winery built at mid-slope above the entrance to the extensive cellars. Without turning her head, she could remember the south-east and south-west slopes, covered in severe rows of grapevine trellises unwinding almost to the bottom of the valley, with the exception of a deep gash in the stone of the hill, which the locals called "le Saut du Moldu".

Hermione repressed a shudder.

Farther to the east, the Montagne Sainte-Victoire was already deep purple, with a bluish heat haze hovering on its flanks like frost on ripe plums, and the rising moon shone faintly above the jagged outline.

To the west, however, the terrace overlooked a large valley. The white stone balustrade was tinged copper with the rays of the setting sun, but the light was still sufficient.

Not for long however.

The air was vibrant with heat but the silence was eerie. Not a leaf moved; the breeze arising from the valley had stilled; poised on the brink of night, the mysterious crack between the worlds waited.

She looked once more at the deep blue shadows of the valley, fragrant with juniper and thyme, at the verdant slope of the opposite hill, at the glory of the red sun, as if to drink the beauty and power of the landscape.

Then she concentrated on her adversary.

His hair shone in the mounting darkness, almost as pale as his face. His eyes were the colour of the translucent dusk. He had donned robes of dark burgundy, either as an aristocratic nod to the merciless nature of the confrontation or in an attempt to unsettle her by taking the colours of her House. His immobility was stone-like.

The air was humming with tension.

It was time.

Hermione tried to remember the words of Mademoiselle d'Estrées who had taught her this particular style of duelling: "Breathe. Ground and concentrate. And count on the rhythm of your heart, for your heart is true."

She took a deep breath and raised the last glass to her lips.

"Very long tears, very unctuous. Deep gold with a rusty tinge, fairly mature wine. Flowery nose : orange blossom, honeysuckle. A hint of broom, signalling an important proportion of Sauvignon blanc. Harmonious and intense palate of passionfruit and crystallized tangerine. Powerful finale, very round, with toasted brioche and a deep note of roasted hazelnuts. Thirty percent Sauvignon blanc, four percent Muscadelle, sixty-six percent Sémillon. Caudalies: sixteen. Sauternes, Château Lafaurie-Peyraguey, first vintage, 1988."

Her adversary scowled and raised in turn his glass:

"Long tears, clear, median viscosity. Bright gold with barely a nuance of light green, wine still in its youth but evolving towards maturity. More flowery than most: violet, acacia, jasmine. Fruity palate of white peach and quince jam. A deeper finale on a note of liquorice, rounded with vanilla. An elegant wine, twenty-five percent Sauvignon blanc, five percent Muscadelle, seventy percent Sémillon. Caudalies: thirteen. Sauternes, Château Doisy-Védrines, second vintage, 1995. »

For the briefest eternity, the two opponents stood still, not knowing who had won.

Then, from the deepening shadows under the pines, a dark voice spoke:

"You have lost, Malfoy."

Hermione shivered. That voice had on her the effect of an old Pomerol: deep, black velvet with a taste of lethal iron.

"That's impossible."

" I removed the labels myself. You had Bastor-Lamontagne 1996."

"Bastor-Lamontagne is far above its official classification. It's unfair."

"Unfair, Lucius? I didn't think you knew the word. Anyway, Château Doisy-Védrines never had less than fourteen caudalies. That alone should have given you the hint."

"....."

"You had the choice of arms, Lucius, and you chose Sauternes. You lost square and fair, admit it, and so did I. You owe Miss Granger a bottle of Château d'Yquem 75, and I owe her a bottle of Château Lafite 72. Not to mention that we are both her slaves till dawn. Let's go inside, Lucius, and maybe if we are obedient, she'll teach us the subtle science and exact art of counting caudalies on the rhythm of our hearts."

Author's Note: "Caudalie: unit of measure in wine-tasting. The sensory persistence of a wine after swallowing is measured in caudalies (1 caudalie=1 second). Good wines have about 10 caudalies, exceptional wines about 20."