

# Travel, Conspiracy, and Men

by karelia

Hermione accepts a career offer she can't resist only to find out she's been set up.  
Two unlikely men offer help.

## One

Chapter 1 of 20

Hermione accepts a career offer she can't resist only to find out she's been set up. Two unlikely men offer help.

Disclaimer: I solemnly swear that I'll never pull a Vander Arse on JKR.

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It had only been three months since she'd left London, but Hermione had started to wonder with increasing frequency whether accepting the Minister's offer had been the right decision for her.

It had all sounded so good. Not only the right career move but also getting away from drab, perpetually wet, stormy, crowded London, and, most of all, Ron. She and Ron had met up with Harry and Ginny to take the children to King's Cross...Hugo had been excited for months to finally make the journey on the Hogwarts Express...and upon returning to their now empty nest, Ron had finally admitted what Hermione had been suspecting for more than a year: there was another woman.

Incidentally, on the day that had inevitably followed Hermione's world crashing down, the Minister had approached her with an offer she found herself unable to resist.

"You'll swap places for a year or so with Edwina Wilson, the current Head of the Phoenix Magical Law Department. You teach the staff traditional methods of Magical Law Enforcement, such as how we found Death Eaters after Voldemort's downfall and how we've been dealing with stray megalomaniacs since, and you learn the technology the American Ministry of Magic has been applying to avoid a dictatorship like Voldemort's.

"Mrs Wilson, in the meantime, will learn traditional methods here and teach staff the technologies her department has been using successfully. And after a year, you'll both switch back to your original Departments. Unless each of you has settled in completely and wishes to stay of course," the Minister had explained.

To Hermione, Phoenix, Arizona, the Land of the Free, had sounded heavenly. No more incessant rain day after day, no more unbearable crowds the moment she exited Diagon Alley, and best of all, no Ron to face daily at the Ministry; instead, warm weather for most part of the year in a young, interesting city surrounded by desert, mysterious mountains and Native peoples. And something new to learn that would benefit wizard kind. Only a successful S.P.E.W. revival had held more attraction.

Unfortunately, three months into her new adventure, Hermione had learned to know better than to consider unbearable heat to be *warm weather*, even if the locals insisted on assuring her that it was an unusually long summer. Well, no doubt, seeing it was a week to Christmas, for crying out loud, and Arizona, after all, was situated in the northern half of the hemisphere. The lack of rain and excessive heat caused her skin to carry a constant layer of dust, which mixed unerringly with the ever-present sweat no matter what variety of cooling charms she applied, making her skin look darker and feel insufficiently clean moments after she stepped out of the shower.

The local wizards and witches, at closer inspection, were as lacking in the intellectual department as British wizards, and most of them were so politically correct they made Percy Insufferable Weasley look positively rebellious.

There were some good points about the place, yes, no denying it. Being away from the entire Weasley clan was one such good point. For the weeks following the break-up

with Ron, after over twenty years of marriage no less, every single surviving Weasley had been grating on her nerves. She'd had to leave unless a long stay in Azkaban were an option, for she would have *Avada Kedavraed* at least Ron. And George. And definitely Percy. And likely Molly, too, just for good measure.

But those were good points about leaving London, not about being in this... snake-infested hell. It might be considered a city, but how much of a city was it really if one shook hands with great diamond-back rattlesnakes on the way out through the front garden, which drove away immediately any pleasant scent of a lone, surviving rose bud? She'd learned the hard way to Apparate at the sight of a rattler within striking distance. Having antivenin administered was not a pleasant experience. *Poor Snape*, she'd thought. *No wonder he died rather than go through this pain...*

Snape had been dead for about twenty-one years now, one of a number of casualties of the last war against Voldemort, but probably the most poignant one. At least Harry, Ron, and she had ensured he'd been cleared of any charges against him and awarded an Order of Merlin, First Class, posthumously. She still thought about him every now and then. He'd never deserved to have his life cut so short. He should have lived; he should have found happiness.

Her next encounter with a rattler, right beside her front door, had her Apparate to the top of a hill in the Superstition Mountains in *panidMountains my arse. The air is no thinner here than in Hellhole Central.* It took a while to calm down and seven Apparations from there, via various hilltops, stops at Apache Junction, Mesa, and Tempe to get to her office in Scottsdale from the hilltop, and when she finally reached her destination, what little spirit she'd started the day with had entirely disappeared.

"Good morning, Mrs Weasley! There is a Mr..."

"How often have I told you to NOT call me that? Call me Granger, call me Hermione, hell, call me bitch. Do. Not. Call. Me. Mrs. Weasley!" Hermione had no wish to commit murder, but right now, casting *Avada Kedavra* on the receptionist sounded like the best idea she'd had in ages, consequences be damned.

Abigail blushed. "Umh, I'm sorry, Miss Hermione." Hermione rolled her eyes, but didn't interrupt the younger witch. "I've been worried about you. You're always here early, and today you weren't." Her voice turned to a whisper. "And then comes this gorgeous blond..."

"What?"

Abigail looked uncomfortable. "Well, yeah, see, I got here at 8.45 as usual, to open up, and a minute later, this... hunk of a guy walks in, a Brit, obviously. Oh, Merlin, you should hear his accent! It's gorgeous! Much more elegant than yours, no disrespect! Anyways, he's waiting in your front room. If you don't want him, would you mind sending him my way?" She looked embarrassed.

Hermione laughed. "Since when do *you* like blonds, Abigail?" Not waiting for an answer, she walked into her office.

"Lucius Malfoy. Colour me surprised. What do you want?"

Malfoy laughed. "Always the Gryffindor, I see. How are you these days, Miss Granger?"

Hermione looked at him suspiciously. "I'm sure that's of absolutely no concern to you, Mr Malfoy." Widowhood became him well, she thought grudgingly, glancing up and down his body. Still that perfect, blond hair; still that impeccable style of robes; and still that elegant air around him. *Why doesn't he seem to age when I already have to pluck out the odd grey hair?* she grumbled to herself. *If he were a Muggle, he'd be waiting for his pension to come in now...*

"Like what you see, Miss Granger?" Only a touch of sneer graced his face.

Hermione looked straight at him and shrugged. "What does it matter to you anyway? Surely, you didn't come here for small talk. Now, if you could tell me why you're here so I can actually get some work done rather than stand here admiring your assets..."

He motioned for her to sit as if it were his own home and said in a very different tone now, sounding almost concerned, "Miss Granger, I'm sorry you separated from your husband. But I thought it prudent to check with you whether you know why you are here, in this very place?"

Hermione looked at him blankly. "What do you mean?"

"Did you know *whom* your soon-to-be ex-husband has been seeing since quite sometime *before* you left?"

Hermione frowned. She had never wasted any thought on the woman her ex had been having an affair with. As an Auror, Ron travelled all over the world; he could have met women anywhere. "No, Mr Malfoy. I never deemed it necessary to find out who the bitch is."

"I thought not." He didn't look smug for once. He still looked somewhat concerned, though.

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A/N: I've taken liberties with prompt 50:*I want... Vacation!Snape! Put him on holiday -- on a beach, on Antarctica, on a plane (or two, or three)! It can be gen, het, or slash, but I would love to see what would happen if he met someone from his past...*

Grateful thanks to southernwitch69 for the beta.

## Two

### Chapter 2 of 20

Lucius proves to be surprisingly compatible with Hermione.

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"Does the name Edwina Wilson mean anything to you?" Lucius asked her, watching her face.

Hermione looked up. "Edwina Wilson," she said slowly, "is the one who swapped jobs with me in order to introduce new technologies for MLE..." When Lucius nodded, a thought hit her. "Are you saying Ron has been fucking *her* behind my back?" The thought was preposterous.

"Obviously *behind* your back," Lucius drawled, and Hermione glared at him. "I've seen them together, and despite my questionable past as a Death Eater, people still tell me things. You know yourself that the Minister pretty much follows Potter's and Weasley's advice...has done for years. So, when Weasley put it to him to swap jobs between you and Wilson, he simply did as told without questioning it."

Hermione felt as if hit by a Bludger. She was glad she was sitting down already. "The bastard," she whispered. "And I thought he'd had the courtesy to wait for Hugo to attend Hogwarts to make it easier on the children..."

"That possibly too," said Lucius. "But from what I gathered, he'd been planning it for a while, and it just happened to work out splendidly for him."

"Fuck," uttered Hermione. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"Now, now, Miss Granger, no need for obscenities," Lucius said, one eyebrow raised. "It is nothing you can't deal with, now that you know the truth." He met her eyes, and she looked at him blandly.

"What can I do? It's not as if I want him back. The last year was hell for me, and I really have no interest in being with him any longer. I'll have a job keeping any meetings civil for the children's sake."

"I'm glad your taste in men has improved," Lucius said wryly. His face turned serious again before he continued. "There is another, possibly far more worrying, matter."

Hermione groaned inwardly. She'd been too uncomfortable facing the possibility her suspicious mind had discovered just weeks after she'd arrived in Phoenix. But Malfoy wouldn't be of course. "Let me guess: the technology invites abuse."

"So you've noticed." He looked satisfied.

Hermione snorted. "How could I not? I've spent the last three months learning how *beneficial* it all is, how to put tracks on *potential* troublemakers without them ever knowing, how to listen in to private conversations. I would be stupid not to notice the potential for abuse there.

"Initially, I was rather impressed with all this technology can do." She pointed at the computers on her desk. "But seeing how I could bust someone like Ron, who's done nothing illegal but likely accumulated plenty of potential for blackmail, simply by tracking any wizard or witch, just imagine how great this would be for someone of a mind like Voldemort's."

Lucius nodded. "Considering how we've always looked down on Muggles *because* they handed total control to their governments from the day they're born, I'm quite surprised so few wizards recognise the new measures for what they are. You can't deny that you see more than mere *potential* for abuse, Miss Granger, can you?"

Hermione glumly shook her head. "No." She sighed. "At least our banks are still in the hands of the goblins or else the Ministry might introduce the equivalent of microchips and a near-cash-free society like they did with Muggles..." Even to her own ears her words sounded lame.

"Well, I'm glad you've cottoned on to it," Lucius said, standing up. "I have every intention of finding out who exactly is behind this idea. No offence to Mr Weasley's intelligence, but I doubt he is more than a pawn in this." He looked at her questioningly.

"True. He is a lot of things, but I've never known him to be interested in taking over the wizarding world." She took a deep breath. *Forme Death Eater be damned.* If Malfoy came to *her*, a Muggle-born, the situation must be worse than she hadn't dared imagine. He'd be an ally, at least for now. "Look, if there's anything I can do to get to the bottom of this..."

"Indeed, there is. I'm acting on a hunch here, but Edwina Wilson's husband is a Muggle with... old money. Care to dig a little deeper, since you're the one with all this wonderful technology at your fingertips?"

She could do this. It wasn't as if she reported to anyone but the Minister, and he was a few thousand miles away. And Wilson was a common enough name to not arouse suspicion should anyone have the audacity to sneak into her office and check on what she was doing. She would have to become friendlier with the staff, not merely courteous so she could find out more about her predecessor. About whoever introduced the new technology.

"Yes. I'll see what I can find out. How do I contact you?"

"An owl will find me. And..." he lowered his voice, "should you find yourself in dire circumstances, go to Taliesin West and say my name. No need to shout it, simply speak it. Then say the name of my grandson, and you will be given access." Increasing the volume of his voice to normal once more, he suggested, "Why don't we meet for dinner in a few days?"

Later, Hermione had no idea how exactly she'd gone from being suspicious of Lucius Malfoy to looking forward to spending an evening with him in the course of less than an hour. She blamed it on his mention of Taliesin West, the masterpiece of an American architect, a Muggle as far as she knew. Very unlike Lucius. It could not have been just because of a mutual suspicion of the reasons for introducing draconian technology; although that helped. Whenever she'd mentioned the potential for abuse to any staff members, she'd been met with wide eyes and a surprised, "That would *never* happen in the wizarding world," followed by detailed rants how the Muggles had allowed their governments to dumb them down systematically over past decades before casting the final strike that aimed for complete control of every individual.

Maybe it was simply because Lucius was a familiar face and, more so, a familiar accent in a foreign environment. Back in London, she'd seen him occasionally at various Ministry functions, each time with a new witch on his arm after he'd stopped mourning for his late wife.

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Hermione woke up and stretched. Sunday. *Yes! I don't have to get up.* Lucius would come by in the afternoon, and they'd probably go and eat out somewhere. He'd spent a few days in London, but had promised he'd return today, hopefully with some news.

Hermione's life had taken a drastic turn since Lucius had walked into her office nearly a month before. To the better, despite the worrying information they'd been able to unearth. Rolf Wilson, Edwina's husband, she'd found out, came from a family who appeared to systematically seek to mate with at least one witch or wizard in each generation. He had an aunt who was a witch, a great-uncle who was a wizard, another great-great uncle who was a wizard, and it went on and on for nearly 800 years into the past. Hermione was amazed his genealogy went this far back; the few people she knew to have an interest in the subject were always lamenting the fact that they could not trace back further than two or three-hundred years. The Wilson clan also seemed to consist of many trouble-makers. One had been hanged in England for attempting to poison Prime Minister Earl Grey in 1831. A sister of Rolf, Serena, was doing time for drug dealing. One of Rolf's uncles was rumoured to have killed his wife, although the case had been closed soon after the event, due, allegedly, to lack of evidence. Hermione concluded that it was a strange family indeed and would justify further investigation.

She heard a knock at the door and went to open it. "Lucius! Great to see you again! How was your trip?" Spending time with Lucius had become the highlight of her days lately. He never failed to entertain her, be it with intelligent conversation or his sense for adventurous outings to wizarding establishments all over the American West.

Lucius bent down and pressed a kiss on her cheek, flustering her. "Hello, darling. I'm glad to be back, to be honest. It was cold and wet and crowded, just as one would expect London to be in February, and I never *did* manage to see Kingsley."

"But the tea is still good, right?"

"Oh, the tea was wonderful, yes." He looked at her with predatory eyes. "But nothing in comparison to this sight."

Hermione felt blood rushing to her face as she looked down her body. Modest, royal blue pyjamas, clearly designed for comfort, dotted with vividly green frogs. "Had I known you're back early, I'd have taken my lace out." It was meant to sound tart, but even to her own ears it sounded more like a confession.

"Ah, well, if that's what your plan was..." He looked at her appraisingly. "How about...?" A flick of his wand left her completely naked. And speechless. "Much better." He lifted her effortlessly and carried her straight to the bedroom.

"Lucius, what do you think you're doing?" Hermione had enjoyed these past few weeks flirting with him on every occasion. It had been the best therapy to improve her self-esteem after having been left by Ron for another woman. However, Lucius had never before indicated that his interest might go beyond outrageous flirting.

"I don't need to *think* what I'm doing, young lady."

She snorted. "Young. Right... I guess compared to you, *I am* young," she allowed, trying her utmost best to sound serious.

He laid her on the bed in a manner one would place valuable china on a table. "And cheeky. An enticing combination I highly approve of," Lucius said, sitting down on her bed and taking his shoes off. He stood up again, turned to face her, and slowly unbuttoned his shirt, never losing eye contact. Once he'd rid himself of his shirt, he took his wand and vanished the rest of his clothing.

The wizarding world might assume that Lucius Malfoy was born for pleasure. Hermione was now learning the truth of this assumption. Being with Lucius was pleasure; she'd already learned that. Being intimate with Lucius brought pleasure to new heights.

With Ron, sex had been... not unpleasant at best, stale at worst. She'd occasionally wondered if something might be wrong with her, but didn't dwell on the thought for too long. After all, she was perfectly capable of bringing herself to orgasm, which proved she was healthy and her body functioned as it should, so she figured maybe Ron hadn't taken enough time or maybe didn't know how. After all, he'd never been the adventurous sort in bed. Those adventures she only knew from hearsay.

Lucius focused on her. He joined her on the bed, still keeping eye contact with her. Then slowly, ever so slowly, his eyes and hands moved to her torso, lightly stroking her ribs, her stomach, and he occasionally purred sounds of delight.

Hermione was unable to suppress a shudder and sighed happily. His hands felt so wonderful on her skin, and the slight tickle of a few strands of his long hair feathering her breast only increased the sensation. Out of their own accord, her fingers found his head and tangled his hair, occasionally tugging gently as her pleasure increased from his administrations.

"Gorgeous," he breathed and stopped the movement of his hands momentarily, eliciting a whimper from somewhere deep inside her. His head bent towards her face, and his lips crushed on her mouth, which opened almost instantly to allow him entry. One tongue explored another, stroking passionately. He tasted wonderful, pleasant, unique. There was a hint of fresh mint and another herb she couldn't quite define, and tasting him further heightened her senses as if they weren't already heightened to the hilt.

She suddenly felt a shiver of cold as his tongue left her mouth to explore other parts, gliding down her neck, showering her with just a hint of little licks, further down to her breasts. One hand gently kneaded her left breast while his tongue flicked over the nipple of her right, then his breath blew on it, making her all the more aware of the pleasurable sensation. Her fingers still entangled in his hair, she felt him withdraw, and her body arched towards his head. *No, stay right there!*

His chuckle came from deep within. "Beautiful." He moved his head, and his tongue now attended to the other breast with equal focus while his hand moved over to the previously kissed one to knead, flick, and rub a thumb over her now very acutely aware nipple. She whimpered in the sensation of simultaneous incredible delight and slight, ever so slight, discomfort.

Then there were feathery kisses all the way down her breast, her ribs, her stomach. Further down, even further, while one hand replaced the tongue on her breast, again kneading, flicking, rubbing, eliciting moans from her.

As his tongue slowly lavished the skin of her folds, his hands moved downwards from her breasts, making her feel momentarily bereft. But then one of his fingers found her clit and circled it in slow, deliberate movements while his tongue indulged in feather-light kisses up and down her thighs, eliciting shudders with yet more delight...and anticipation.

The circling around her clit stopped only to be replaced by the lightest touch of his tongue, which quickly grew into a sucking movement, one moment bordering on pain, only to be replaced with gentle strokes further kindling the fire that started deep in her core. She arched into his touch and moaned. "Lucius..."

"Like this?" His tongue, his velvety, clever tongue circled her clit now. "Or like this?" The tongue was smoothly replaced by his finger while the rest of his hand's digits delved deeper between her folds.

"Oh, yes..." She arched further up into his hand, fingers, tongue. It was the most exquisite torture she'd ever experienced *Whatever you do, don't stop...*

One moment, there was sensation, the next, the fire exploded into fireworks. The orgasm engulfed her entire body, her entire being, helped by digits finding that spot somewhere inside her wall. "Oh. M...M...Merlin!"

The deep chuckle prolonged her shattering. "Beautiful. Gorgeous. You should see yourself. What a sight to behold." His voice sounded deeply satisfied.

At least one finger still pressing against her inner wall, actively prolonging her orgasm, his head moved upwards, and lips came again crushing down on hers. For the first time in her entire forty years, Hermione tasted herself, and it was strangely erotic.

When her body finally slowed down its contractions and Lucius ended the play with her tongue, she sighed, deeply content. "Best. Ever."

He chuckled. "I hope only to date. Surely, there is more."

Her eyes widened. "I've never felt this way..."

"Well," Lucius drawled. "Blonds in general are rumoured to be more sophisticated lovers than ginger-heads. I'll leave it up to you to decide."

"This one is also far more self-confident; I'd say, bordering on arrogance," she said and snuggled against his chest. She wondered how she could have missed so many years of pleasure with Ron. Good riddance.

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A/N: For details of the prompt, please see chapter 1.

Grateful thanks go to southernwitch69 for making this more readable. For correct writing, thank her. For mistakes, blame me.

# Three

## Chapter 3 of 20

Hermione admires Lucius's home, and Lucius reminisces.

Disclaimer: I don't own the characters, nor do I make money.

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Much later, when the sun was already setting over the desert hills, Lucius said lazily, "Who would have thought, eh? A Malfoy and a Muggle-born."

Hermione suppressed a giggle. "At least you're referring to me as a Muggle-born," she said wryly. "You really have changed."

"I've not called anyone by... *that* name in over twenty years I'll have you know."

"Oh, really? What stopped you? It must have been a profound experience," Hermione said as she played with his hair. It was gorgeous hair, long, thick, healthy, and it felt pleasantly lush between her fingers.

"That it was. I'll tell you some time," he promised. "But today I've reserved for pleasure, not for reminiscing."

That sounded perfect to her. "I rather like that."

"Good. Now, how about a change of venue? Your bed is nice and comfortable, but my bedroom has an en-suite Jacuzzi. That, combined with the right potions, will ensure you'll not feel sore tomorrow. And of course, we'll engage in other pleasurable activities, too."

They finally got up and dressed, and then Lucius Apparated them to his place.

Hermione's jaw dropped. "You *live* here? But the place is a Muggle museum! I took the tour on the first Sunday I spent here." She could tell he was pleased with her reaction; Lucius was positively gloating.

"It is a rather well kept secret that Frank Lloyd-Wright was a wizard, even amongst magical folk. Every single home he designed has at least one extension with built-in distraction charms. So, essentially, unless you know about it, you won't see it.

"When I first arrived, I added a few wards for precautionary measures. Your wonderful technology should not get through here."

Another part of Taliesin West suddenly came into view. Hermione could have sworn it hadn't been there before and looked around curiously, but could barely make out more than the silhouette of the building in the darkness.

Lucius steered her towards the extension, and with a flick of his wand, a large, wooden door opened silently. Unlike most American homes, this one opened into a long, fairly wide corridor. Sconces and paintings of landscapes decorated the walls, and the floor was nearly entirely covered with a burgundy and bottle green Persian rug. "Follow through until you reach the kitchen at the end of the corridor," he said behind her. "I'll just reinstate the wards. Won't be a moment."

Hermione slowly walked down the corridor, admiring the art on either side and taking in the regal atmosphere, which was even more evident in this part of the building. The section that housed the museum had impressed her deeply already. Not only had it been designed to blend in with the landscape typical for the Sonoran Desert but it was also built in such a manner that the heat was reflected completely outwards, thus providing a comfortable temperature even on the hottest days.

This part...Lucius's current home...comprised a wizarding architectural delight. Candles came to life when the nearest door opened, fireplaces lit as soon as someone sat down on a sofa or chair in the room. The main goal was obvious: to provide comfort in every respect.

Hermione looked around the kitchen, her eyes wide in wonder. A wine shelf covered one entire wall from floor to ceiling. Another wall housed shelving and books. Opposite it was the largest Welsh dresser Hermione had ever seen, and next to it stood an Aga.

"Like it?" Lucius strode through the door. "If you want a drink, simply say aloud what you'd like. As long as you're near the table, it'll appear on that." He walked over to the wine shelf and gazed at the bottles. "Yes, I knew there was one left," he murmured and took a bottle. "Médoc Grand Cru from 2005, by far the best vintage in some fifty years." He placed the bottle in the centre of the kitchen table and sat down opposite Hermione.

Her eyes bulged as she watched the cork slowly extracting itself from the bottle. Two wine glasses appeared next to it.

"We'll let it breathe for a while. In the meantime, how about trying out that whirlpool?"

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The more time Hermione spent with Lucius, the more she appreciated him. He was charming, entertaining, attentive, and he had a sharp mind. And gorgeous hair. His clothing was always impeccable, and so were his manners. Quite the striking opposite of Ron. Hermione had given up early on in their relationship to change Ron; it had never worked anyway, and she'd preferred to preserve her energy for worthwhile projects. Since she'd been with Lucius, she had come to realise what a difference having a well-groomed man by her side made. Wherever she had gone with Ron, they'd received preferential treatment because they both were war heroes and best friends of Harry Potter, still the most revered wizard alive. Wherever she went with Lucius, they received preferential treatment because people could not help but be at his beck and call; his air demanded it.

Two months into their relationship, neither Hermione nor Lucius had discovered any more information on who was behind the drive to introduce the technology that would ultimately give total control over the wizarding world. That this was the ultimate reason became ever more clear as new laws were gradually and subtly introduced into wizarding Britain. A one-paragraph article on page ten of the *Daily Prophet* informed of the Compulsory Muggle School Act 2020: Wizarding Children born on or after January 1st, 2010 are required to attend Muggle school between ages 5 and 10.

An owl from Harry informed her of another law, the Death Eater Prevention Act: The hoods of cloaks must cover no more than half the forehead.

"That's ridiculous!" Hermione exclaimed. "How can people fall for it?"

"It is," Lucius agreed. "But we *will* find out who is behind this, and then we'll put a stop to it.

"By the way, I received an owl from Kingsley. He finally agreed to keep tracks on Edwina, and I have no doubt something will come up before long."

Hermione looked at him, her expression less despaired now. "I hope so. It's a bit discouraging that every lead I've been following is fizzling into nothing. It's as if someone *knows* how to erase their tracks."

Lucius looked up. "You, my dear, are a genius!" He picked her up and swirled her around once, oblivious to the fact that they were in her office and anyone could have walked in.

Hermione laughed. "Why, thanks, love, but how did you come to that conclusion?"

He looked at her smugly. "Who, would you say, knows this technology better than anyone?"

"Whoever invented it of course." Suddenly, she saw Lucius's train of thought, and her face brightened.

"One Wilson is known to be a computer genius. In fact, if I'm not mistaken it's the one whose wife died under suspicious circumstances. Damn, we need someone trustworthy who can hack computers." She frowned.

"Hack? Oh...!" Lucius's face lit up. "I might know just the right person. Although it might take some convincing to get him to come out of hiding. Hm, we shall have to see..."

Hermione was unable to follow him now. "What do you have in mind, Lucius?" she asked curiously.

He took a deep breath. "Time to share some information with you, my lovely. Remember that Sunday we made love the first time?"

Hermione nodded. "Like I'd ever forget."

"I'm glad to hear you won't. You commented that I referred to you as a Muggle-born, and I promised to tell you the reason some time." He looked slightly discomforted, and Hermione placed her hand on his arm. "You don't have to tell me, you know. But if you do, I promise I won't judge you or laugh at you." Now was not the time for their usual banter, however mild.

"I appreciate that, love." He took another deep breath, visibly unsettled. "Do... do you have a problem with bisexuality?"

Hermione shook her head, confused. "Why would I have a problem with that? As long as you don't expect me to find a female lover..."

He chuckled. "Of course not. I'd rather not share you. For now. I know some Muggles condemn it, that's why I asked. It's not uncommon in our world, as you know. Anyhow, when I first joined the Dark Lord and then soon recruited others, I found myself in a relationship with one man for a while. He left to work elsewhere, I got married, and we each went our own ways until Draco started at Hogwarts. I bribed my way into the Board of Governors just to have an excuse to visit Hogwarts more often. I wanted to rekindle the affair, and Cissy had no objections."

Hermione wondered whom he was talking about, but did not want to interrupt him. Dumbledore had been gay, she'd never had any doubt, but he didn't strike her as Lucius's type in the least. Flitwick even less so; to associate Professor Flitwick with any sexuality at all made her shudder. She suddenly hit her forehead with her hand, completely oblivious to Lucius watching her closely.

"Professor Snape," she whispered.

"The one and only," Lucius confirmed, smirking slightly. "So, he was not adverse to start again, and we spent time together. Severus eventually convinced me of the foolishness that is racism about a year before the Dark Lord fell. In the months he was headmaster and the Dark Lord sullied Malfoy Manor with his presence, it was Severus who kept me sane. He found all kinds of excuses to call me to Hogwarts without raising the Dark Lord's suspicion. On one occasion I witnessed Severus dress down Phineas's portrait because he referred to a Muggle-born as Mudblood. I was surprised the frame of the portrait was left intact, considering Severus's fury. I've not used that word since, but don't ask me whether out of respect or the fact that I have feelings for him. I don't know the answer to that."

"Okay..." Hermione was confused. "Are you going to tell me what this has to do with finding a hacker? I mean, Professor Snape has been dead for over twenty years, Lucius!"

For a while, Lucius stared at the wall, his expression changing from one moment to the next from uncertainty to reminiscing to smugness. Then he looked at her, his face blank. Eventually, he started to speak again. "You do know I trust you, don't you?"

Hermione looked at him, frowning. "I assume you do..." She had no idea where this conversation was heading, but on the other hand, it hadn't taken her long to learn to expect the unexpected where Lucius was concerned.

"Nevertheless, I have to ask you for a wand oath that what I'm about to tell you will not ever be shared by you with anyone. It ~~is~~<sup>isn't</sup> a matter of trust, Hermione, but if, Merlin forbid, someone finds out you're trying to get to the source of all this... control freakery, the last thing we'd want them to know is any secrets you harbour." He looked at her expectantly.

She did not have to think twice. What he'd said made perfect sense to her, so she held out her wand, ready to take the oath. She had a feeling she was in for some surprising news.

After she'd sworn on her wand, she leaned back deeper into the sofa and waited for him to speak again.

"What do you remember of the end of the war? Specifically in relation to Severus?" Lucius asked.

"Harry, Ron, and I saw him die. Nagini bit him, Voldemort left the Shrieking Shack, and we took the Invisibility Cloak off. Then Professor Snape gave Harry some memories and died. The next day, Harry and I returned to the Shack to retrieve his body, but someone else had already done that. He was buried at Hogwarts in a tomb built just for him a couple of weeks later."

Hermione frowned. "The service for him had a big turnout, but I don't recall seeing you!"

Lucius smirked slightly. "What a remarkable memory you have. Now, tell me, why would his best friend and lover not attend the burial service, especially since it was days after my entire family had been pardoned by the Minister upon Potter's recommendation?"

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A/N: For details of the prompt, please see chapter 1.

If you're interested, pictures and some facts about Taliesin West (only the Muggle parts) can be found [here](#).

Grateful thanks go to southernwitch69 for making this more readable. For correct writing, thank her. For mistakes, blame me.

## Four

An intimate talk with Lucius, during which much is revealed, and a trip to London are in order.

Disclaimer: Honestly, who do you think I am? JKR? Um. No.

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Hermione finally had at least a vague idea where Lucius was heading. He'd not broached the subject of Snape often, and when she thought about it, she'd noticed that he'd never spoken of Snape in the past or at least not as if he were dead. She had excused it, assuming it was because he'd been very fond of Snape and was simply reminiscing, maybe with a touch of denial even. "Are you going to tell me next that you didn't go because there was no body to bury? Or at least not Snape's?"

Lucius's smirk turned into a wide grin. "Why, my lovely, that is exactly what I was going to tell you."

"Are you saying he is alive?" Hermione asked, her eyes wide.

"He is alive, he is well, and he's as horny as ever for me," Lucius said, sounding positively smug.

*Rub it in, why don't you*, she thought, but to her own surprise, the stab of jealousy she'd expected never came. She'd probably consider casting *Avada Kedavra* on any woman who came too close to him, but strangely, she didn't begrudge him Snape as his lover. Hermione was unable to suppress a happy grin spreading across her face. "That is the coolest news I've heard since Voldemort bit the dust," she said, sounding goofy even to her own ears. "It's wonderful that he's alive! I often thought what a shame it was that he'd never had a proper life, you know..."

"Oh, really? I'll tell him you approve. I always thought his students never liked him." Lucius was visibly pleased.

She thought back to her student years and the war. It had never been actual dislike, even less so when she'd realised he'd been playing a dangerous double role. Hermione shook her head. "I can't say I *disliked* him. Maybe sometimes, when he was being vicious, but not generally. And I admired him tremendously for the role he played as well as for his intellect."

"Oh, he'll love to hear that!" Lucius looked satisfied to the extreme.

Now Hermione's curiosity was acutely piqued. "Where does he live now? Oh, and *how* did he survive?"

Lucius laughed. "Oh, I love it when you're so inquisitive! Unfortunately, I cannot tell you where he lives. His place is not only Secret-Kept but also further Warded..."

"And you are his Secret-Keeper?"

Lucius let out a small sigh. "Yes, I am, but you'll understand that I will not disclose his location without his consent?"

"Yes, of course," Hermione assured him. "So, can you tell me how he survived?"

"That I can do," Lucius confirmed. "It was I who found him, probably shortly after the three of you had left the Shrieking Shack. Severus had taken precautions; he had assumed, correctly so, that the Dark Lord might go after his wand. And of course he'd expected to be bitten by Nagini. Anyone reasonably close to the Dark Lord expected to be bitten by her at one time or another. Fortunately, Severus had the knowledge and means to develop antivenin, anti-venom, and various potions he might or might not need to survive a bite."

Hermione nodded. Snape's apparent unpreparedness for a snakebite had entered her mind more than once over the years. How such a powerful and intelligent wizard would not be prepared for a snakebite had never made sense to her.

Lucius's voice interrupted her thoughts. "So, naturally, I had an inkling what had happened when the Dark Lord suddenly appeared with Severus's wand in his hand and a very triumphant look on his face. I left his side as soon as I could do so unobtrusively and went to the Shrieking Shack. Severus carried many potions and a Portkey on his person at all times, and I knew of course. So I Portkeyed him away, spent a very scary night during which he hovered closer to death than life, but eventually, the potions I'd forced down his throat started to work, and he recovered sufficiently to send me back to be with Cissy and Draco and to find out whether the Dark Lord had won. Imagine my relief when I learned he'd been defeated." He seemed to be reminiscing, as his face showed an expression of consummate relief.

"I can imagine," Hermione said softly.

Lucius let out a dry laugh. "Can you really, love? I don't know if you can." He sounded wistful. "When I returned, I had no idea whether I'd find Cissy and Draco still alive. For all I knew, the Dark Lord might have killed one of them or both to punish me for disappearing. He was very unpredictable at the best of times and became even worse so after he'd taken over the Ministry. On the other hand, I couldn't have let Severus die... Anyway, that's how he survived, and the rest is history as the saying goes."

"And then Harry spoke in your favour to Kingsley," Hermione prodded. She'd always known why Harry had done so, and it had less to do with Lucius than the entire Malfoy family. Narcissa had saved Harry's life shortly before Voldemort's demise by making him believe Harry had died, but Harry had also observed that both Lucius and Narcissa had put the well-being of their son before bowing to their master. Where there was such obvious love, there had to be a way for redemption, Harry had argued, and Hermione had agreed with him wholeheartedly.

Lucius nodded pensively. "He did that, and I still owe him." He frowned. "Maybe his action then was the reason I sought you out to uncover this whole conspiracy. Potter said to me, 'As long as you'll never try to gain power on the Dark side, your debt is paid.' I suppose my relatively new conscience doesn't allow me to merely stop at seeking power, but be proactive when it comes to preventing someone else from doing so."

"Relatively new conscience, eh?" Hermione was unable to suppress a chuckle.

"Well, yes! I certainly can't claim one during my younger years," Lucius said, and Hermione detected an ever so slightly defensive tone to his voice. "But we live and learn, some faster than others. Anyhow, now you know all the gory details." He moved closer to her and ruffled her hair. "And I can't say I regret approaching you..."

"I'm glad you did," Hermione said. "I feel younger now than I felt ten years ago, and my only regret is that I stayed loyal to Ron for so long, even though the signs of his infidelity had bugged the hell out of me for years."

Lucius raised his eyebrow. "Are you saying Edwina is not his first fling?"

"I doubt she's the first, but I can't be certain. It's just a gut feeling. There were earlier occasions when I thought I'd detected a whiff of a woman's perfume or found a black hair on his robes. But I always let it go. I guess I was... comfortable," she admitted.

Lucius regarded her curiously. "Say, how do you feel about me and Severus?"

"Good question." Hermione sighed. "I feel no jealousy if that's what you're wondering. I guess... I think I wouldn't go as far as wanting to watch you with him, but I'm okay with it. I would hate to share you with another woman, though," she added sternly.

Lucius laughed. "Oh, I can promise you there won't be another woman, love. And I wouldn't expect you to watch Severus and me, unless of course it appeals to a more voyeuristic side I've not yet detected in you."

She shook her head determinedly and huffed indignantly. "I'm pretty sure I don't have such a side, Lucius!"

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The only positive points about being back in London, Hermione thought, were the weather and the fact that she was with her children, who had not taken too well the fact that their father was having an affair...had been having an affair for some time. Molly Weasley, who had been fairly insistent that her precious son would never have started an affair had Hermione not driven him to do so because of her own inadequacies, had had her opinion corrected by Harry, and Hermione was grateful. Coping with the extremely strong-willed Weasley matriarch was hard work at the best of times, but being blamed unfairly by her had been unbearable and made her initial departure from London all the easier.

Molly had gone as far as inviting Hermione to stay at the Burrow, but Hermione had declined. She was only staying for two weeks and had no interest in sharing the precious time with her children with anyone else, least of all her ex-mother-in-law.

Lucius had offered her to stay at Malfoy Manor, but Hermione wasn't overly keen on running into Draco or, worse, Pansy. Instead, she decided to stay at a Muggle hotel in Central London with Rose and Hugo, making it a real holiday and engaging in typical tourist activities. They visited museums, galleries, ate their way around the ethnic world on offer, read Muggle books together, and talked.

One evening, they met with Harry for dinner, and to Hermione's surprise, he didn't have much positive to say about his best friend. Harry was careful enough with his words, as the children were listening, but Hermione clearly came away thinking there was a considerable dent in their formerly unwavering friendship. *Interesting...* She was grateful when Harry mentioned that Ron had extended his visit to the French Ministry of Magic. Just the thought of facing him caused her discomfort. With the vast geographical distance and an attentive and attractive man at her side, she had not wasted many thoughts on her years of marriage, but so close to the scene and Rose and Hugo serving as a constant reminder of her past with Ron, she did not want to think about her failures or her ex-husband's.

The two weeks were over before Hermione knew it. She'd miss Rose and Hugo, she'd miss the rainy weather that was the subject of every small talk, but she was glad to return to Lucius. He'd promised her he would return from his visit to Snape on the same day as she, and they had planned to spend the evening together at Taliesin West.

Luggage reduced and in her and the children's pockets, Hermione Apparated Rose and Hugo to the Burrow where they were enthusiastically greeted by the Weasley patriarch. Arthur was clearly enjoying his holidays, which, in true wizarding fashion, were increasing by a few days every year. Molly was busy preparing tea when the door burst open and Harry rushed in.

"Oh, I'm glad I caught you before you left, Hermione!" he started, out of breath. "The Ministry has just issued a new law this morning, effective immediately, that users of Portkeys have to have passports to exit the country! The Portkey office is a right mess at the moment!"

"What?" Hermione exclaimed. "That's ridiculous! Without warning? I guess I better Apparate then."

Harry sighed as he sat down at the kitchen table and gratefully took the mug with steaming hot tea from Molly. "I know... It's getting worse all the time. And people don't even seem bothered over it." He frowned deeply.

Hermione groaned inwardly. Apparating across the channel wasn't so bad, but a few thousand miles...she'd have to do it in instalments. "Molly, do you have a worldmap? I can't stay here and wait for the Ministry to issue a passport."

"Well, that wouldn't be a problem, Hermione. You work for them, so surely you'd get one instantly," Harry said.

Hermione sat back and thought for a moment, glad that her children were out of hearing range, playing in the living room. Then she shook her head. "No, Harry, I don't think so," she said slowly. "I think it's time to... rebel. Civil disobedience if you will; one has to start for others to follow. All those laws they've been introducing, both the British Ministry and the American Ministry of Magic, they're clearly designed to control individuals. And I simply don't buy it that it's for the good of the wizarding world and to keep big bad Death Eaters at bay. It's ridiculous if you think about it."

"I thought they've been a bit heavy-handed lately," Molly chimed in as she handed Hermione a map of the world. "I've lived through two wars, and seeing as there hasn't been a single Death Eater attack since Voldemort died, these new laws all seem a bit exaggerated. Especially if we consider that we got rid of him without any such *protective* laws in place." She almost sneered.

"You know... my parents always longed to live in a society that did away with any forms of identification. Yes, they were idealists as far as Muggles were concerned, but the lack of ID requirements was one thing they'd *always* admired about the wizarding world."

Hermione mentally decided her route back to Phoenix, picking out the far northwest of Ireland as the first stop, then a remote spot in Iceland, the Statue of Liberty in New York City, one of the Seven Preposterous Hills in Oklahoma, and a possible stop in Albuquerque. She could have chosen a more southern route, but it was hurricane season, and she'd rather not be caught in one. The danger of potentially landing on a rattler in Phoenix was acute enough...no need to add a freak weather into the equation.

"If these laws are protective, I'll start breeding recluse spiders," Hermione said blandly. "I'm glad my children are old enough to be at Hogwarts. Imagine those poor younger children; they're forced to attend Muggle schools. I wonder how long it'll take the Hogwarts staff to undo the *education* those Muggles impose on the poor dears!" She rose from her seat. "I should go. Apparating is going to take a bit longer than a Portkey."

Saying good-bye to the older Weasleys was easy; saying good-bye to Harry slightly less so. But having to leave Rose and Hugo behind once again broke her heart.

"Mum, do you think you can come back so at least you live in the same country?" Hugo asked, his voice hitching, but he managed to suppress the tears that threatened to fill his eyes.

Rose put her arm around her younger brother's shoulders. "Yeah, Mum. I wish you'd live closer."

Hermione hugged them both. "I'm never too far to receive your owls, okay? And how about if I come pick you up to spend the Christmas holidays in Phoenix? It won't be awfully hot then, and most of the snakes will be hibernating!"

She received enthusiastic responses to that, made a mental note to inform Ron of the plan, and finally Apparated.

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A/N: For details of the prompt, please see chapter 1.

Grateful thanks go to southernwitch69 for making this more readable.



# Five

## Chapter 5 of 20

Lucius goes away for a visit.

Disclaimer: I solemnly swear that I'll never attempt to publish a Harry Potter Lexicon.

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Lucius did not waste time once Hermione had left for London. He Apparated straight out of Taliesin West to the southern shore of Mexico, from there to the top of some mountain in Peru, and then stopped in Chile's Patagonia region for a couple of hours, knowing precisely what to obtain for Severus. Swiss chocolate. Mendoza Cabernet Sauvignon. A block of Mantecoso, ensuring it was made from milk of high quality, not some poor substitute with questionable ingredients. He could have procured such items in Phoenix, but he was certain the products in Southern Chile were fresher, thanks to the region's diverse ethnicity and known appreciation for artisan foods, and besides, it was more fun doing so in a part of the world where the majority of the population was dark haired. He'd never denied loving the attention his hair or impeccable appearance garnered wherever he went.

Armed with what he knew Severus would appreciate, he Apparated to the southern-most tip of Tierra del Fuego in Argentina and leisurely walked to the beach, enjoying the cold wind and lack of rain. It was one of the rare occasions rain was absent in the area, especially in the South-American winter. He briefly thought of the heat he'd left behind in Phoenix and Apparated to Shackleton's Hut on Ross Island, steeling himself in preparation for intense cold.

Lucius was unable to suppress a shudder when he saw the seal blubber hanging from the walls. *Yuck*. The sight disgusted him every single time, and even the knowledge that the blubber had been preserved for over a hundred years by the Arctic...or rather Antarctic...temperatures did nothing to lessen it. He turned away and scanned the walls for a tiny bookshelf. Ah, there it was. He removed a dusty copy of *The South Pole* by Roald Amundsen, wondering how dust could make its way to the permanent ice shelf of all places, and knocked on the wooden part of the shelf behind the book. Then he moved the book back into place and stood back, waiting.

A few minutes passed, and Lucius started to wonder if Severus would turn up. Maybe he was busy. Or maybe he'd made new friends and no longer held any interest in keeping up with old friends. *No. Not Severus*, he thought.

Suddenly, the front door creaked and revealed Severus Snape in all his black glory. "Lucius. About time, too."

"Oh, darling! It's so good to see you. And so well!" Lucius looked him up and down and wondered how this man could remain so unbelievably young. He looked not a day older than the day he'd Portkeyed him out of the Shrieking Shack, but considerably healthier. No greasy hair either. *It can't be due to his potions alone...*

Severus's expression softened very slightly as he accepted the kisses Lucius bestowed upon his face with regal indifference.

"Bastard," Lucius murmured. "Tell me to stop it and I will."

Severus quirked an eyebrow. "Why would I tell you to stop? Please, continue."

"I might freeze in the process. It's fucking winter here, and Antarctica isn't exactly known for its mild temperatures, Severus. If you want tongue, kindly let's go to a warmer place."

"Forgive me. You're right of course. *I*so enjoy coming up here just for the cold so I can appreciate once more the constant temperature down below, you see." Snape waved his right hand towards the wall housing the small bookshelf, and it revealed an opening the size of a door. "After you."

After a few minutes' walk through a cave-like corridor, which became rapidly warmer as they descended further, Lucius entered what he knew to be Severus's home. Upon first sight, it appeared even more spacious than he remembered, but it had lost none of its beauty. All walls as well as the roof and ceilings were transparent, allowing light to filter through from a seemingly obscure source. Some of the furniture...bookshelves, a coffee table, the kitchen table, even the bed frame...appeared to be crafted out of crystal, casting the entire house in an airy, light atmosphere.

A content sigh escaped Lucius as he let himself fall onto the large sofa. "The beauty of your home will never cease to delight me..."

Severus quirked his eyebrow. "Do you mean to say you prefer it to Taliesin West?" He sat down in an oversized chair opposite Lucius.

"Yes, I think I do. Although I would miss one aspect I associate with Taliesin," Lucius said.

"I thought you look far too sated for it to be from our last encounter. You're too horny for your own good." Severus's frown never developed fully, and his words lacked bite.

Lucius laughed. "I won't deny it."

Severus quirked an eyebrow. "No, you wouldn't," he said slowly. "But this one is more on your mind than any other woman in the last ten years. A witch?"

"Why don't you look?" Lucius made an inviting gesture with his hand and relaxed deeper into the sofa.

It didn't take a second invitation for Severus to cast a silent *Legilimens*. He entered Lucius's mind and instantly found what he sought. Lucius sitting on the top step of a whirlpool, his face an expression of pure bliss, his hands buried in a woman's unruly hair. The woman's mouth was around his cock, her torso and lower body immersed in the sparkling, bubbling water.

Lucius in an office, swirling the same woman around.

Lucius in bed, bending over the woman. With unruly hair. Severus remembered her now. A Muggle-born student once. Friend...no, best friend...of Harry Potter. Granger. No, Weasley. He vaguely remembered the wedding announcement in the *Prophet* years ago.

"You? With Granger? A Muggle-born?"

Lucius chuckled. "Merlin, Severus, you don't know her. There are twenty years between the little swot and Hermione in the present. She is a goddess."

"Yes, I can clearly see that is what you think of her." His tone was dry.

"No, Severus, I don't think you understand." Lucius's tone was firm.

"I think I do, Lucius," Severus said softly. "You've fallen in love with her."

He watched Lucius change expressions. Watched him squirm. Eventually triumphed when Lucius gave in. "I think I have."

"And what's so bad about that? No doubt she's better off with you than that Weasley boy. Even if he did manage to grow into a man," Severus said. "Oh, and did you mention tongue?" He stood very close to Lucius and now bent down, capturing his mouth in a searing kiss. When Lucius moaned, he abruptly broke away. "I hope she doesn't mind sharing."

"She doesn't."

Severus laughed. "You actually asked her?" he asked amusedly.

Lucius nodded in confirmation. "She is very happy that you didn't die from the snakebite. She also said she never disliked you at school, only when you were...what were her words?" Lucius frowned. "Oh, yes, I remember now. Only when you were particularly vicious."

"Most of the time then," Severus said wryly, eliciting a chuckle from Lucius. The sound still turned him on, and he decided not to waste time. Talk was highly overrated; they'd have plenty of time for that later.

Severus knelt down in front of Lucius and started to open the buttons of his robe, then pulled his underpants down to free his erection. "Yes!" He appreciatively put his hand around Lucius's cock before allowing him to pull him up. He sat down on the sofa next to him before Lucius attacked his robes with equal enthusiasm. When both were naked, Severus lay back, staring into Lucius's grey eyes unwaveringly.

"Still like being on top then?" he asked lazily.

"Always, love," Lucius replied and Accioed the massage oil he knew was stored in the bathroom. He poured some oil into the palm of his hand and rubbed both hands together. Sniffing the potion delicately, he said, "Hm, you changed the formula. Not as lemony as I remember it."

Severus made an unintelligible sound and relaxed further. Lucius took Severus's right foot and started rubbing his hand on his sole, occasionally venturing out to his toes and in-between them, eliciting the occasional grunt from his partner. Then he moved to the left foot, doing the same.

Eventually, he moved his hands slowly, ever so slowly, up his calves, ensuring no millimetre of skin would be left untouched. He enjoyed the occasional...very occasional...sounds from Severus. Sounds that led him to believe to be on the right track as usual. *Enjoy, my lovely...*

---

Much later, when the two men were once more fully...and impeccably...dressed, Severus asked, "So, what's happening in the wizarding world? Any worthy gossip?"

Lucius filled him in on the latest events, including his and Hermione's suspicions about the Wilson clan.

Severus nodded. "Why am I not surprised... The folks down below are considering intervening with the Muggles. They've been suspecting for a long time that those bloodlines that control the Muggle world are aiming for a complete take-over of the planet.

"Bloodlines?" Lucius asked, confused.

"Muggle ones, Lucius," Severus said. "There are only about twenty families in the Muggle world who wield power. They are more obsessed with the purity of their blood than the Dark Lord ever was. They've achieved complete control over the Muggle world over the course of hundreds of years, in such a hidden, secretive way that rarely any Muggles ever found out until it was too late."

"And how do they preserve their lines? There must be one hell of a lot of inbreeding going on."

Severus snorted. "There certainly is. One reason the people down below are finally planning to intervene is because they feel only able to if they can be reasonably assured of winning. Now that those control freaks are sufficiently weakened...thanks to their obsessive inbreeding as well as their blatant carelessness in recent years...it hopefully won't even take that much effort. Besides, the pollution is starting to affect the inner oceans and rivers, which really is not acceptable."

Severus Accioed a bottle of wine and some fruit to the coffee table.

"I see you're being looked after quite well," Lucius said, grinning appreciatively as he eyed the fresh fruit.

"I'm certainly content with the arrangement," Severus replied. "And from what I've gathered, so are they. These people have never had a need to introduce money. It's fascinating, really, to experience a monetary-free society where everything is available in abundance. Their creativity has never been dimmed by restrictions of society..." His face took on an almost dreamy expression, and he seemed very much at peace with himself. "Some years ago, after years of communication, we came to an agreement that it might be prudent to generate an income so that when the time comes to make contacts with Muggles who aren't complete robots, money will be available in abundance."

"And you're enjoying it." It was not a question.

Severus shrugged and took a sip of his wine before he replied. "I brew potions and market them; of course I'm enjoying it. And I amuse myself reading e-mails from various Muggle governments demanding to be informed of a mailing address so they can send me a tax bill." He smirked.

Lucius laughed. "Oh, I can just imagine how amusing that must be."

"Well, have you ever suggested to anyone there might be life inside the earth? Or even just wondered aloud if the earth might be hollow? People would instantly compare you to the Lovegoods."

"Indeed," Lucius agreed. Looking at the computer on a desk on the opposite wall, he added, "And I'm certain the Yanks would be mightily pissed off if they knew you've been hijacking their satellite internet connection," he added, making Severus chuckle. Then he was unable to help himself. "Say, will I ever meet any of them?" He'd visited Severus a number of times, but had never even seen one of the dwellers inside the earth, let alone met one.

"A handful of Muggles have joined them since I've moved here. They were only allowed to enter after agreeing unconditionally to remain down below if they enter through the South Pole region. Apparently, other areas allow for somewhat more open contact." Severus shrugged.

Lucius took minutes to digest the information. Then he said, "But you've been back up on the surface! How so?"

Severus rolled his eyes at him. "For a start, am I a Muggle? Besides, I'm usually the one to go to Buenos Aires to deal with the banks and mailing orders. Wouldn't do to keep customers waiting. And most importantly, I've allegedly been dead for over twenty years. Nobody in this part of the world knows who I really am."

Lucius could see his friend's argument. It didn't stop him from trying again, though. "I'm not a Muggle either, you know," he said, sounding petulant.

Severus let out a long-suffering sigh. "I'll see what I can do to arrange it. I'm going to harvest ingredients tomorrow afternoon and will ask."

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A/N: For details of the prompt, please see chapter 1.

Grateful thanks go to southernwitch69 for making this more readable. For correct writing, thank her. For mistakes, blame me.

## Six

### Chapter 6 of 20

Hermione learns that geysers spew hot water, and Lucius starts telling her about his trip down South.

Disclaimer: The characters are not mine. I only borrow them to let them shag get closer with each other.

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Lucius's wish was finally granted on the day before he was due to return to Phoenix. He was more than ready to be with Hermione again, even though he'd enjoyed himself tremendously with his friend. He'd gone to Buenos Aires with Severus, grudgingly admiring how the Potions master had dealt with the Muggle bank manager and Muggles in general. They'd visited Patagonia occasionally to explore the wild, ragged southern-most tip of Chile, and they'd even visited Phoenix once, although not Taliesin West.

They had made love often, and Lucius had even more often shared little antics of his recent life with Hermione. He could not deny missing her.

The two men were enjoying a hearty breakfast when the room was suddenly bathed in a soft, turquoise light. "Ah. We have a visitor," Severus said and stood up to open the door. He returned with the tallest woman...no, lady...Lucius had ever seen. Her height must have been a good six feet, Lucius had no doubt, and she moved very gracefully. Her very long, thick, blonde hair...with such a perfect shine that Lucius made a mental note to ask her what she did to it...was tied loosely at the back, and her entire outfit...more like robes than anything resembling Muggle clothing...was a resplendent display of the entire blue spectrum. From the lightest aqua, through more shades of turquoise than Lucius knew existed, to indigo and the darkest navy, no hue was left out.

Her age was impossible to guess. At first sight, she looked no older than thirty. Her intense eyes, however, belied that impression. Lucius could happily fall into those eyes and absorb an aeon of wisdom. *Not thirty, then.*

"Lola, my friend Lucius." Severus turned to Lucius. "Lucius, Lola is a resident of Agharta proper. She and I developed many of the G.A.Y. potions together."

Lucius bowed. "Enchanted."

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Hermione cursed the lawmakers throughout her tedious travels back to Phoenix. Portkeying would have left her queasy for a few minutes, and then she would have forgotten about the journey. Compared to it, Apparating in stages was ridiculous. The moment she reached the Irish West Coast, she was hit by rain so hard that she was soaked to the skin before she could gather sufficient concentration to Apparate again. She couldn't be sure about the weather in Iceland, her next stop, but hadn't quite expected to appear right next to an active geyser, and her mood was not improved by hot drops of something...water...hitting her chilled skin. She took a few, fast steps away from the source of the heat and didn't waste time to Apparate to the platform of the Statue of Liberty...where she was promptly hit by another downpour. At least tourists seeing her appear from nowhere was not an issue. *Oh, stop whining about getting soaked! It's not as if you won't be wishing for rain for the next four or five months!* she admonished herself and Apparated straight to just outside Albuquerque and, after taking a few deep breaths, from there to the front of Taliesin West where the sky offered a splendid display of colours in all hues of the rainbow spectrum announcing the end of the day and welcoming her.

By the time she'd gathered herself and reached the front door, her clothes were dry again. For the first time since she'd arrived in Phoenix some ten months ago, Hermione was grateful for the dry heat. Before she could make up her mind whether to knock or simply unward the door herself by saying the name of Lucius's grandson, it opened to reveal Lucius. Her heart jumped, and for a moment she felt the terrible uncertainty that so often caught new lovers after their first time apart. *He's going to tell me he'll go to live with Snape...*

"Splendid to see you! I was afraid you might have changed your mind about coming back!" Lucius opened his arms to her.

Hermione flew right into them and held on to him for dear life. "I'm so glad to see you," she mumbled into his shoulder, making him chuckle.

Lucius gently turned her head and guided her chin, forcing her to look into his eyes. "Say that again."

Hermione laughed, emotional stress she hadn't known about falling off her and relief washing over her. "I'm so glad to see you." She raised her head, her lips seeking his, and he lowered his head, meeting her mouth. When they finally ended the kiss, both were panting slightly.

"Welcome home, love," Lucius said softly and steered her towards the living room where an open bottle of wine and two glasses awaited them.

Hermione let herself fall into the deep, soft sofa, a sigh escaping her. "Merlin, it feels good to sit down!"

Lucius sat down next to her, and after pouring some wine in each glass, he looked at her closer. "My, you do look a bit dishevelled. Since when is travelling so hard?"

Hermione laughed. "Apparently, since this morning." She told him of the new law, of her conversation with Harry, and finished, saying, "As much as I appreciate Apparating over short distances, it's a right bother over several thousand miles."

Lucius grinned. "Trust me, you'll get used to it after a while. Want a bath?"

Hermione did not need to think. "Yes, that sounds heavenly!"

He led the way to the Jacuzzi, which was already bubbling, ready to offer pleasure and relaxation, making Hermione shudder lightly with anticipation.

"Allow me," Lucius purred and proceeded to unbutton the back of her robes. Then he unfastened her bra, let it fall carelessly to the floor, and pulled her knickers down. "Go ahead, love. I'll be in shortly."

Feeling giddy from the sensation of his hands, she obeyed wordlessly and entered the pool. She sat down on the built-in bench, up to her shoulders in the bubbling water, and watched Lucius discarding his clothes and stepping into the water towards her. Her arms opened out of their own accord, and she was grateful that he walked keenly into them before sitting down right next to her, his right arm snaking around her shoulders. She leaned her head against him and said quietly, "I'm relieved that you're back here. When I arrived, I was scared that you might have decided to stay with Snape, or leave me for some reason, or... whatever."

"Would it make you feel better," he said slowly, "if I told you that I've had similar fears?" He pulled her closer and gently cupped her breast with his left hand. "Ah, I missed that, too."

Her sigh turned his attention to her half-lidded eyes, and he smirked. "Still like it, then?" He drew his right arm around her shoulders and cupped her other breast as he moved in front of her. His thumbs were now skirting around the edge of her nipples until they peaked, and then he pulled slightly, first one, then the other, making her gasp.

"Oh, how I've missed that," Hermione moaned as her hands grabbed his hair to fondle and enjoy. Letting it run gently through her hands was like fingering the most exquisite silk.

He lowered his head underwater to take her nipple into his mouth. His tongue circled and prodded before he sucked the tip of her nipple deeper into his mouth. Like a starving man relishing every bite put before him, Hermione relished every contact of her body with his hands and tongue causing stabs of pleasure deep inside her.

His head appeared above water, leaving her momentarily bereft at the loss of his mouth on her breasts, but then his mouth sought and found hers. Tongues explored each other while Lucius's hands inched their way down her body until they reached the delicate skin between her thighs. He stroked and brushed against her curls, and she arched against his hands.

"I want to feel you inside me." Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Lucius obliged keenly and guided his erection at her entrance. Then he thrust in, filling her completely. He stopped momentarily, eliciting a whimper out of her. "Like so, my love?"

"Oh, yes," she moaned. "Faster!" She met his thrusts, and it took no time for the couple to find the perfect rhythm.

Never interrupting, his one arm held her to him while the thumb of his other hand found the right spot, and he circled it, at first slowly and gently, then with increasing urge until he felt her body stiffen and her muscles contracting around him. Watching her expression of passion turn to utter bliss was his own undoing, and he spilled himself inside her.

Hermione let out a sigh of satisfaction as her breathing slowly returned to normal. "I don't know how I made do without that for the past two weeks..."

Lucius smirked as he sat down next to her. "I missed you, too, you know."

"So, did you have a good time with Snape?" Hermione asked lazily. Now that she was once more confident he wouldn't run off to live with Snape, her curiosity about his stay with him won out.

"Oh, yes. Severus always makes sure we enjoy ourselves," Lucius replied. "We also hatched an idea how to defeat the control freaks." He took her hand and moved it above the water, inspecting it closely. "But I'd say if we stay much longer in here, we'll end up very wrinkled. Let's go to the living room, and I'll tell you all about it over that bottle of red. How does that sound?"

Hermione nodded and sighed. "I suppose you're right." She could have happily stayed in the whirlpool with Lucius forever.

Once they'd settled down on the sofa in the living room, both only wearing bathrobes, each sipping from their glass, Lucius started telling Hermione about his trip to beneath Antarctica.

"He lives below the South Pole?" Hermione asked incredulously. "How did he manage that? Dig a hole?"

Lucius laughed. "He lives there all right. But no, he didn't have to dig a hole or build his own home. It is not commonly known that inside our planet, there is an entire continent that's inhabited just like the surface. Only the people who live there are peaceful and creative. They never fight in order to gain control or power; that concept is completely foreign to them."

"Oh? Interesting! Do you think the Wilsons could learn from them?" Hermione asked, snickering.

"Absolutely. They will, whether they want to or not," Lucius said and chuckled, then sobered quickly. "I don't actually know exactly how or when Severus made his first contact with the people down below. But he had his current home already set up by the time Nagini bit him, for that was where I brought him.

"Anyhow, I've visited him often over the years, but this was the first time I met the people there. It was quite fascinating."

"I bet..." Hermione suddenly felt as if she was utterly out of his league. *People down below? There is life beneath the earth?* It was too foreign a concept for her to grasp quickly. She swallowed hard and looked at Lucius, silently urging him to continue his unlikely tale.

"Lola, a dweller of Agharta, a city far below the South Pole, came to Severus's home yesterday morning." He stopped for a moment and then said, "Blimey. I can't believe it was only yesterday. Feels like a dream already..." He stretched, took a sip of his wine, and continued. "Anyway, so, yes, she came to pick us up. Her partner, Karl, who is a kind of governor in Agharta...they're elected by their people according to their wisdom, and there is absolutely no corruption, would you believe...is very concerned about what's going on here on the surface of the earth. Not only him, mind, all the other governors, too."

"Sounds like Utopia to me, love," Hermione said and took a sip of her wine.

"No, Utopia is further in. I think, about a thousand miles or so," Lucius replied.

Hermione's eyes widened. "There is a Utopia?"

Lucius laughed. "Yes, it's the name of another city, much closer to the inner sun, and the people of Utopia are generally revered for their incredible wisdom. I can imagine how you feel, though, love. Whenever Severus mentioned the people from the inside, I doubted his sanity, to be perfectly honest. I mean, I know he isn't insane, but it all sounds so unbelievable to an outsider like me. But I know different now..."

Hermione nodded slowly. "Yes, it sounds like a nicely spun fairy tale. But I do believe you!" she added hurriedly.

Lucius smiled sardonically. "I don't blame you if you don't believe a word I say, my sweets. You'll find out for yourself, I assure you." He took another sip from his glass, finishing it, and *Accioed* the bottle to refill their glasses. "Lola took us from Severus's place further down the corridor...well, it's more like a cave...and suddenly, this cave-like passage opened into a forest clearing. It looked just like an ordinary forest, and I was almost certain she'd led us to somewhere on the surface. Although the light was a bit dimmer, I figured that might have been the forest. But then, there was this... vehicle on the edge of the clearing." He took a deep breath. "I honestly don't expect you to believe me, love, but it kind of looked like a gondola. She opened it with some motion of her hand, no wand or anything, and it was way larger inside than from the outside."

Hermione nodded and shuddered slightly, as she could not help but remember the months she'd spent with Harry and Ron before Voldemort's defeat. It was not a happy memory. "Yeah, we used to have a tent that was about five times the size of what it looked from outside... But go on!"

"We stepped inside, sat down, and the thing started to move. No engine sound, it just moved, seemingly out of its own accord. A few minutes later we landed in this... it looked like a town made entirely out of quartz crystal, surrounded by most luscious displays of nature. There were people around, all of them friendly, and old played with young or talked with each other, and it was a very peaceful atmosphere.

"Lola showed us around. They have gardens where they grow food without anything that might damage the environment, and their fruits and vegetables are much bigger

than ours and more tasty." Lucius stretched again and suppressed a yawn. "You tired, too?"

"Yes, I am, but I really want to know how they will help us defeat the control freaks," Hermione said and yawned.

"All right, I'll tell you that, and then the rest of it will have to wait until the morning," Lucius agreed and added, "You're not going back to work yet, are you?"

"No, I have another couple of days holiday. And yes, as long as you tell me that, the rest can wait till the morning," she said as Lucius pulled her up and steered her towards the bedroom.

When they were both settled in bed, Lucius smirked. "The answer is magick."

"Magic?" She sounded dumb to her own ears.

Lucius looked smug. "Magick. With a 'k' at the end."

"What's the difference?" Hermione frowned.

"You know some Muggles do magick, right?"

"Yes, I've heard about that."

"What do you know of sex magick, love?" he asked.

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A/N: For details of the prompt, please see chapter 1.

Grateful thanks go to southernwitch69 for cleaning up my chapters. For correct writing, thank her. For mistakes, blame me.

## Seven

*Chapter 7 of 20*

Hermione and Lucius explore... some kind of magick, and Lucius suggests a Halloween weekend in Buenos Aires.

Disclaimer: I solemnly swear that I'll never attempt to make any moolah out of this.

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The sun tickled her awake the next morning, and Hermione stretched, untangling herself from the embrace Lucius had held her in. While stretching, she remembered the weird dream she'd had.

*Fuck. That wasn't a dream.*

"Nah. Wasn't a dream. Was all real," Lucius mumbled as he opened his eyes.

"Sex magick?" Hermione asked, just as incredulous as the night before, and was suddenly very wide awake.

"Yes, love. Nothing we haven't done before. It's just... being more aware, is all." He yawned and pulled her closer towards him, one hand caressing her stomach, making his intentions very obvious.

For the first time, Hermione was not tempted to give in to him. She wanted answers. In words.

"Lucius! Stop!" She sighed. It was nearly impossible to resist him when he had his hands everywhere on her body. But the need for answers won. "How exactly does it work?" Hermione asked. Saving the world by means of sex magick was simply unfathomable.

"I'm not entirely certain this moment," Lucius admitted. "When Karl and Lola explained it, it made perfect sense to me. However, I seem to have trouble remembering details."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "Honestly, Lucius! If I didn't know better, I'd suspect you're saying all this just so we can shag more often *even* more."

Lucius smirked. "Well," he drawled, "that surely is an acceptable bonus, wouldn't you say? But it is not so simple." His face turned serious. "We will have to practice making love consciously."

"Consciously?" Hermione asked tartly. "I'm not aware we've ever shagged while unconscious."

Lucius let out an exaggerated sigh. "What ever happened to that famed brain of yours? Up to now...and correct me if I'm wrong...whenever we've made love, it was for pleasure. No other goal than that, correct?"

"Of course," Hermione agreed. "Isn't that what sex is all about?"

"Usually, and for the vast majority of humankind, yes. The difference between sex and sex magick is that the parties involved are aware that situations can be created if they focus on a particular goal, especially at the very moment orgasm washes over them. The male and the female create, and the female grounds the creation in this reality." He smirked again. "Naturally, it takes lots of practice to *create* this way."

It was a lot for Hermione to take in. Furthermore, she had an inkling that focussing on a goal other than pleasurable sensations when Lucius's hands and mouth performed a magic of their own might prove very difficult.

It did. By evening, Hermione was convinced it was not doable, and despite having received plenty of physical satisfaction, she felt frustrated, albeit on a different level. "I'm a failure," she wailed. "I couldn't even *focus* on the wish to have another day's leave!"

"Don't fret, love," Lucius soothed her. "Lola did warn me that it would take time and practice. And taking back the wizarding world is a rather large task, but it's not as if we have to be ready by tomorrow."

A resigned sigh escaped Hermione. "True, but how much time *do* we have? I only hope we'll improve soon." She did not hold a lot of hope, despite Lucius's reassurances.

"Come. Let's get ready and go out for dinner. We'll just have ourselves a nice evening." He pulled her up from the bed and then walked towards the wardrobe to choose suitable robes.

When both were dressed and ready, Lucius smirked. "I shall get you used to longer-distance Apparating. There is this wonderful lobster place in Maine." He took her hand and, with a *pop*, Apparated them first to a deserted alley where he whispered, "Detroit. Good for a short stop-over, but there are more interesting places to see." Another *pop* and they found themselves on a beach.

It was dark, but the waxing moon provided sufficient light for Hermione to be able to admire the ocean. She took a deep breath. "Ah, beautiful! Salty air and no heat!" She realised that long-distance Apparition with Lucius was nowhere near as bad as Apparating alone had been.

"I hoped you'd appreciate that. In summer, this area always reminds me of the Cornish coast," Lucius said and smiled at her. Then he pointed at some lights a short distance away. "There's the restaurant. Wizard-owned, and it offers the best lobster I've ever eaten."

As usual, Lucius was right. Hermione did not recall an occasion of eating tastier lobster. She leaned back and sighed contentedly. "This was a wonderful meal, and I think I've eaten about twice as much as I normally do."

Lucius laughed. "Yes, same here. But who could resist such great food... Besides, considering today's practice of... our project, we were bound to be starving.

"Cheesecake for afters?" He looked at her questioningly.

*Gods. I'm already stuffed... But... cheesecake!* Hermione gave in. "I cannot possibly resist cheesecake."

"You shouldn't. It's the best," Lucius assured her. "And when we're done eating, we'll walk it off on the beach. 'Tis the perfect night for a walk...of the romantic sort."

When the couple returned to the beach, Hermione stopped for a moment to take off her shoes. The light-coloured sand looked soft and inviting. Lucius took his boots off, and they strolled along the shore, holding hands, shoes and boots floating silently behind.

Lucius slowed down and then stopped completely. "An auspicious night, my dear. The air is brimming with magic here, what with the moon close to peaking." He looked up at the near-circle of the moon. "We should take this as a sign to try magick once more."

His voice, now seductively low, sent shudders through Hermione's spine, and she turned into him. "If you put it like that..."

Lucius first took her cloak off, then his own, and Transfigured both into one large blanket, which he Spelled to lie pristinely on the sand. Next, he picked his witch up without effort and placed her on the blanket. Bending down, he teasingly nipped at her neck.

Hermione felt his erection press against her front and arched her body up against him. She felt his hand cupping her still-clothed breast while his mouth moved from her neck, trailing kisses downwards until it reached her other breast. He growled lowly and Spelled her clothes off, which neatly folded themselves on the edge of the blanket, although entirely unnoticed by the couple. Hermione moaned softly and ran her nails down his back as the sensation his hand and mouth ignited a fire somewhere deep inside her.

When both his hand and his mouth stilled, she whimpered. Lucius Spelled his own clothes off his form and lifted his head to meet her eyes. "What is it we aim for, Hermione? Tell me! What do we wish to create?" he whispered urgently.

"A... another... another day of leave," she said and was surprised she could utter the answer relatively coherently.

"Good girl," he crooned and captured her lips in a searing kiss before returning his attention to her breasts.

Lucius once more pulled away from her, reminding her again. "Concentrate on wanting a day's leave, Hermione." Then his hands and mouth slowly moved downward, one hand still kneading her breast, finger and thumb flicking her taut nipple, while the other hand lightly stroked her body, heading downward, and his mouth moved along her stomach, softly grazing her very alive and very aware skin with his teeth.

He softly bit the inside of her thigh before shifting his body to place his erect member at her entrance. He thrust, and Hermione arched her back, digging her nails into his shoulders. Just as she felt the fire begin to kindle deep within her, Lucius hissed, "A day's leave, love. Keep that thought!"

"Adaysleave, a daysleave, adaysleave," Hermione's mind...or maybe her voice, she had no idea...chanted as her breathing quickened and Lucius's thrusts sent her over the edge, followed almost immediately by his own orgasm from the feel of her muscles clenching around him.

He spilled himself inside her, moaning, "Yes... You did it..."

They both felt the shift in energy...slight, but nevertheless noticeable. "Strange. Everything seems to be clearer," Hermione said as they lay on the blanket, her breathing becoming more even once again. "Not that I've ever had problems with my eyesight, but... everything looks sharper, with more clarity."

Lucius chuckled and nodded. "I knew you weren't talking about eyesight, love." He frowned momentarily. "Let's go home and note down what exactly we did differently this time and at what point we felt the energy shift." He got up from the ground and held out his hand to pull her up. When they were dressed, the couple Apparated back to Taliesin West, again via Detroit.

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The rest of the summer and early autumn was taken up by Hermione's work, practice of sex magick...always with the same goal of Hermione receiving a day's holiday...and ever-increasing the distances of Apparating. Lucius had been right: Hermione did get used to it. Apparating from Phoenix straight to Manhattan no longer posed a problem.

For Halloween, Lucius suggested a visit to Buenos Aires. "It's a Saturday, so let's leave early and stay overnight. There are some wizarding hotels there, and many restaurants offer excellent fare. Plus, it'll be a pleasant change of scenery."

"Sounds good to me," Hermione agreed. She didn't mind going anywhere with Lucius. And ever since the law had changed, imposing identification for Portkey travellers, Apparating had acquired a touch of rebellion to it, making it rather attractive. It was not...yet...illegal to Apparate; however, Portkey travel was strongly encouraged and continued to be free.

Initially, the cost of a Portkey had been scrapped as an incentive for travellers. But three months later, it was still free. Hermione and Lucius often wondered how the Ministries covered the cost involved with staffing the Portkey checkpoints and making them. Eventually, Hermione decided to owl Harry; maybe he'd know. She would draft a letter, then take it with her the next morning, and visit the owlery in Mesa on her way home.

Hermione arrived in her office, early as usual. She had just completed going through her parchment mail and turned her computer on to check her electronic mail. It started, but then there was a click-like sound, and the PC as well as the lights and air conditioning system shut off. "What the hell..." she mumbled and walked out to the reception area.

"What's going on, Abigail? My office has no..."

"I know." Abigail held up her hand. "By the looks of it, the entire area is without electricity." She pointed to the window, and Hermione saw that the traffic lights were out, and there were no lights in the office building on the other side of the road.

The phone rang, and Abigail picked it up. Hermione's thoughts strayed. *Why does the Ministry insist on using Muggle housing here... It's so inefficient. They surely could get around the problem of magic interfering with electricity like they did in the Ministry in London...*

Abigail's voice ripped her out of her thoughts. "The power won't come back on today by the looks of it. There was an earthquake in the San Diego area, and the power plant serving this area was damaged." Abigail shrugged.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Bloody inefficient Muggle systems," she grumbled. Then she thought quickly. It was Friday, and the office would be closed over the weekend. The phone in the office was only installed for the benefit of the American staff who were married to Muggles. Her mind made up, Hermione addressed Abigail. "Right, we'll shut the office down for the day. I can't do much without a computer, and I have no intention of getting bored just sitting here. Send owls to the staff out in the field and inform them. And tell them to go home when they're done. You can go, too." Hermione remembered her letter to Harry. "Oh, and Abigail, would you do me a favour?"

"Sure, Miss Granger."

Hermione handed her the letter. "Can you take this to the owlery and send for me. That'll save me the trip there."

Now she could go straight Taliesin West, and if Lucius was home, they could leave today for Buenos Aires, making it a long weekend.

"Darling, I'm home early!" Hermione shouted as she opened the door into Taliesin West.

Lucius came out of the kitchen. "Wonderful! We can leave for Buenos Aires, yes?" Then he frowned. "How did you manage to have nearly the entire day off?"

Hermione laughed and told him about the earthquake hitting the power plant. Lucius shook his head in confusion. "I've just come back from the diner, not even five minutes ago. The news reported nothing." He frowned. "Strange, that. Normally, they're very quick reporting disasters..."

Hermione never failed to be amused by Lucius's fondness of having breakfast at a Muggle diner and watching the news on its large TV screen, but now it occurred to her that it was strange, indeed, if the earthquake had not appeared on the news. It had been well over an hour since the power cut. She whispered, not quite daring to lend the thought voice, "Is our magick working?"

"I don't know," Lucius said slowly. "But it is certainly a possibility." Then he grinned. "Let's pack some clothes and leave. We'll have plenty of time to practice at the hotel. And this time, we'll create *three* days of leave for you."

With only one stop, in Brazil, Lucius and Hermione arrived in Buenos Aires shortly before dinner time, given the time difference. Lucius pulled a piece of parchment out of his robe. "*Entrada al Paraiso*. Yes, this is the one," he confirmed, looking at the sign of the building in front of them. "Let's get to our room, and, oh, I should let Severus know we're in the area."

They entered through a revolving door into the lobby, which reminded Hermione more of some shady Muggle establishment than a wizarding hotel. Deep-red, plush chairs sat on a darkish-pink rug, surrounding two low, distinctly heart-shaped, purple tables. Lucius approached the old man behind the desk. "Yo comprendo tu tienes manera de entrarle en contacto Severus Snape."

"¿Quién Dice?" the old man enquired.

Lucius offered a thin smile. "Yo soy Lucius Malfoy, pero Lola dijo tu haces."

Hermione fingered for her wand and silently cast a translation charm. She'd had no idea Lucius spoke Spanish, or maybe he had just been better prepared and cast the spell before entering the hotel.

The old man gave the couple a scrutinising look and seemed satisfied. "And who might Lola be?" he asked but grinned as if he were engaged in playful banter.

Hermione was grateful that he sounded perfectly English now.

"A dweller of Agharta. Her partner is Karl," Lucius replied.

"I believe you." The man turned around and produced a key. "Your room is number sixty-eight. Enjoy your stay. Los Amigos have wild Atlantic sole on offer tonight."

Lucius thanked him and motioned for Hermione to enter the only corridor leading further into the hotel.

The room was pleasant and showed no resemblance to the style displayed in the lobby Hermione noticed with relief. An owl was dozing outside the large bay window. When Hermione took off her cloak and threw it carelessly on the bed, it floated immediately to the wardrobe next to the door, closely followed by Lucius's boots, which hurried to the shoe shelf underneath the wardrobe.

Hermione watched open-mouthed, and Lucius laughed. "Never stayed at a decent wizard-run hotel, love?"

She shook her head. "Certainly not one so full of contradictions! When I saw the lobby, I thought we'd mistakenly entered a brothel..." Lucius snickered, and she cast him a glare, "...only to find a really nice, tastefully decorated room with added benefits." Only Lucius would find a place like this, she thought.

They settled in quickly. As soon as Hermione took her reduced luggage out of her robe pocket to enlarge it back to its normal size, it did so itself. When she unzipped it, her clothes flew out by their own accord and arranged themselves neatly in drawers and on hangers. Her toothbrush, moisturising potion, and bath salts ...the latter two in glass vials...gently floated, a foot below the ceiling, into the bathroom where they carefully settled themselves next to the sink.

"I could get used to this... really," Hermione said and added, "Shame its only for the weekend."

"I'm glad you like it. We can always come back for longer. Argentina is a rather fascinating place. As is Chile, which isn't far.

"For now, though, I suggest we get ready for dinner. The sole at Los Amigos is not to be frowned upon. Their escargots are very good, too."

Hermione shuddered. She'd always thought herself quite adventurous when it came to trying new dishes, but snails would never be on her list of new things to taste. "I'll leave the escargots to you. Thanks, but no thanks," she said and rolled her eyes when Lucius smirked.

The first word that came to mind when they arrived at Los Amigos was *cute*. Surrounded by what was obviously accommodation for the well-to-do, it stood out with its small front and eclectic colouring. At a second glance, Hermione realised that the entire facade comprised one mural, depicting various scenes of magical life.

"It is said that if you look long enough, you'll find yourself on the mural," Lucius explained amusedly. "Most first-time visitors to Los Amigos spend a while here, admiring the artwork before going inside. I did, too."

They spent a while perusing the mural, but eventually, Lucius suggested to enter the restaurant.

Hermione suddenly realised how hungry she was. With the power cut and the decision to leave early, she had forgotten about lunch. "Yes, let's go in. I'm starving!"

"See? Sometimes, an American breakfast is handy. I've not felt hungry until now," Lucius said.

The interior of the restaurant was as unique as the exterior. Parts of the walls were covered by colourful fabric, others with small murals, and yet others hidden by tall, deep bookshelves filled to bursting, which gave the large room a very informal atmosphere. Tables and chairs in chocolate-brown and teal seemed haphazardly splattered throughout. Some were occupied, but there were plenty of empty tables, too.

When she saw a woman approach them, Hermione silently re-cast the translation charm so she would understand any exchange between them.

However, when the woman had reached the couple, her face turned into a wide, genuine smile. "You must be Mr Malfoy and Miss Granger! I realise you expected to dine alone, but Karl asked if you might care to join him and Lola," she said with a heavy Spanish accent.

Lucius turned to Hermione and raised his eyebrow. "Are you ready to meet inhabitants of the inner earth, love?" he asked his speechless partner.

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A/N: For details of the prompt, please see chapter 1.

My beta is the most awesome beta in the world. It's SW69 of course. Thanks, love.

## Eight

*Chapter 8 of 20*

Hermione and Lucius are having a good time, and finally, Snape turns up.

Disclaimer: Not mine. What you recognise belongs to JKR and whoever she wants to share with. What you don't recognise likely belongs to me. No ice-shelves were melted in this adventure.

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Hermione met Lucius's eyes, lost for words. Eventually, she nodded. The woman motioned for the couple to follow her. As they swept through the dining room into a corridor, Hermione muttered, "Lucius Malfoy, you better explain yourself."

Unperturbed by his lover's ire, he lightly caressed the small of her back and said in a conversational tone, "I will, love. Don't fret."

They had now reached a door. The woman opened it without entering herself and waited, nodding and smiling at Lucius and Hermione as they walked through into an obviously private dining room. Then she closed the door behind them, offering privacy.

Hermione followed Lucius to the only table, at which two handsome people...taller than anyone she'd ever seen...were sitting.

"Lucius!" Lola and Karl exclaimed as one and stood up to greet him in a manner somewhat too intimate for Hermione's liking.

Looking at the tall woman, Hermione felt suddenly inadequate. *Her hair is so beautiful. She is so graceful, even though she must be near seven feet tall. Her robes are so exquisite...* She resisted the urge to flee with all her might. Until Lola turned to her.

"You are Hermione." It was not a question, but Hermione nodded, completely tongue-tied as Lola's melodic voice entered her every pore. "I am Lola. This is Karl, my partner. We are dwellers of Agharta. But I am sure you know that already."

Hermione nodded again, still at a complete loss what to say, but the feeling of inadequacy turned to awe as Lola spoke, her musical voice washing over her like a symphonic masterpiece, her genuine smile never wavering.

She continued, "I have heard about you and have been looking forward to meeting you. How do you like Buenos Aires?"

Hermione smiled back, finally finding her voice. "I've not seen much, but so far, I like it very much."

Karl and Lucius had stopped conversing, and Karl approached Hermione now to gather her in what Hermione could only describe as a fierce hug, although considerably gentler than the bone-crushing ones Hagrid used to bestow on her. "It is so good to meet you, Hermione Granger," he said, and Hermione had to look up to meet his eyes. They were a deep greenish blue, reminding her of the ocean on a perfect summer day.

"I'm pleased to meet you, too," she said and, with a swift glare at Lucius, added, "even though it's entirely unexpected."

Her words elicited deep chuckles of amusement from both Lola and Karl. Lucius failed his attempt at an innocent expression in a most spectacular fashion.

They all sat down, Hermione and Lucius opposite Lola and Karl, and Karl filled the newcomers' glasses with a dark, red liquid. "Cabernet Sauvignon from Mendoza," Karl declared, sounding very content.

Lucius smirked. "Do I detect Sev's influence here?" he asked amusedly.

Lola laughed. "I think you might, Lucius!"

"How is he?" Lucius inquired. "I sent a message for him through Pedro earlier."

"He is doing well. I spoke to him this morning and asked him to join us. He might change his mind now that he has heard from you directly," Karl said and offered another smile that would make its recipient forget any woes, Hermione thought, her initial discontent entirely forgotten.

It was, all in all, a highly enjoyable evening. The company turned out to be excellent. Both Karl and Lola displayed fierce intelligence and, despite their isolated lives beneath the earth, were very much aware of the politics and control issues in both the wizarding and Muggle worlds.

"I suspect the Wilson Clan has been trying for a long, long time to find a way of controlling the wizarding world," Karl said.

Hermione readily agreed. "Considering how at least one Wilson in each generation married a witch or wizard over the past few hundred years, yes."



"And if you look at the genealogy of American presidents as well as the Royal families in Europe, you'll find plenty of evidence how the Wilsons are connected to those in power, even though they prefer to operate far behind the scenes," Lola added.

"That knowledge might be useful, but how are we going to stop them?" Lucius asked curiously.

Lola and Karl smiled. "We've been working on a plan with Severus. Our conclusion is that we beat them with their own weapons," Karl said.

Hermione felt lost. "How so?"

Karl grinned. "All people in power, be it in the wizarding or Muggle world, are corrupted and have something they don't want to become common knowledge. Essentially, we'll start by finding the dirt on them and... help make it public." He nodded in emphasis of his words.

Hermione drew a deep breath. "That is one huge task."

"Oh, it is, but it *is* doable," Lola said and, seeing Hermione's questioning glance, explained, "You see, power itself is neutral. However, power gained for personal greed is negative. And all negative energy will self-destruct. Sometimes within minutes of its creation, other times it'll take an aeon. But its self-destruction is inevitable."

"Our aim is to... accelerate this self-destruction of the negative. We do not like to interfere with your worlds, but your actions...or rather those of the ones in power...do not leave us much choice, as we are as keen to survive as they are," Karl added.

Lucius nodded slowly. "I understand your rivers and oceans are beginning to show signs of pollution."

"There is that," Karl said. "But also, from Galileo's discovery that the earth is not flat until a little over a hundred years ago, the existence of our race, living inside the hollow earth was fairly common knowledge amongst the more educated people. It is the reason why the Germans explored first Tibet and then Antarctica in the 1930s. They even found entrances to our lands, and some returned at the end of World War II. The American government suspected that and sent General Byrd out. The German survivors did not like being messed with, so Byrd's mission became an epic, if secret, failure, which led to the Americans installing McMurdo base. To the outside world, it is a science project to learn more about the least discovered continent. In reality, it exists to stop any human from finding the largest entrance to our world. The Muggle governments do not wish for the masses to know that life can be lived in perfect peace here on earth. Or rather, inside earth, as they make sure it is not possible to do so on the surface."

It was much for Hermione to take in, and she made no attempt to comprehend everything Karl had said immediately. "Are you saying Muggle history books lie?" she asked eventually.

Lucius snorted inelegantly, but Lola held her hand up to stop him speaking. "In the third dimension, where greed is so evident, history is always written by the victors. So you'll always have a one-sided account of events. Add to that the compartmentalisation of every governmental department, and you can imagine how history is written."

Hermione glared at Lucius. "You can snort all you want at Muggles, dear, but surely you're not so blind as to see that the same has been happening in the wizarding world." She quirked her eyebrow at him, entirely unaware of the resemblance of Lucius's own mannerisms.

Lucius smirked. "True enough. Twenty years ago, everyone would have laughed at the suggestion of new Death Eaters being around. Ten years ago, the idea was very slowly, gently almost, introduced, and now we need damn identification to travel by Portkey. All under the premise that it stops Death Eaters from causing havoc when in reality it's probably all fabricated in order to hold control over the population."

"Oh, that does carry a Wilson's signature! Doing everything in the most clandestine manner, and by the time people realise, it's too late, and they're trapped," Karl said, and Lola nodded in agreement.

A thought entered Hermione's mind. "And where does the sex magick come in?" she asked bluntly.

Lucius chuckled. "Ever the Gryffindor."

Hermione shrugged. "I was under the impression that it's important," she said defensively.

Lola smiled. "It is certainly a very valid question, Hermione. Sex magick does several things: First of all, it grounds the energy in this reality that is necessary for creating a peaceful world without anyone taking control."

Hermione nodded, and Lola continued. "Furthermore, a small group of Muggles uses sex magick for their own ends. We need to neutralise this effect, and the best way to do so is with the same method: sex magick. And then, finally, we'll utilise this form of magick to actually *create* a peaceful, control-free world."

Hermione took a deep breath. "That's... that's one huge undertaking," she said.

The tall couple smiled. "You are not alone, never forget that," Karl said softly, and Lucius put his hand on her arm.

"You have me, love." Then he smirked and added, "And I'd say practising sex magick is splendid fun, too!"

Hermione half-heartedly rolled her eyes at him, eliciting laughter from everyone present.

"But can we *do* this? How can one couple succeed? How can one couple save the world?"

"Oh, no, it won't be just the two of you!"

Hermione was horrified for a moment, her mind suddenly filled with images of massive orgies, until Karl continued. "We have 400 thousand couples who are not only willing to engage in this project but also know the energy involved...from a spiritual point of view...much better than either of you do. No disrespect."

Hermione smiled uncertainly. "It's all right." Just the assurance that she and Lucius weren't alone...and no expectation of engaging in mass orgies...in this project took a rather large weight off her.

"Keep in mind, though, that the two of you are the ones to ensure the energy is grounded in this reality," Karl said, making Hermione instantly doubt herself again.

"And just the two of us are sufficient for this?"

"Well, we'll just have to see." Lola sounded evasive, and Hermione had the distinct feeling the tall woman knew more than she let on. She looked at her, but Lola held her eyes until Hermione could not help but look elsewhere.

As the evening wore on, talk turned to less intense subjects and more idle until Hermione was unable to suppress a yawn.

"You must be tired. No wonder, I find new places are always tiring," Lola replied to her apology. "If it's fine with you, how about meeting for tomorrow's dinner?"

Karl wrote down the address of another restaurant for Lucius, and then all said their good-byes. Lucius and Hermione Apparated straight to their hotel room from the restaurant's front garden, the mural that had grabbed their attention upon arrival completely forgotten now.

Hermione fleetingly thought of taking Lucius to task over omitting to tell her about meeting the couple from Agharta beforehand, but she felt too tired and too content to argue. It had been a wonderful evening, after all, and she wanted to treasure the fond memories.

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An owl scratching against the window woke Hermione up early in the morning. She watched lazily as Lucius got out of bed to open the window. A cold drop of rain hit her square in the face. "Oh, I love Buenos Aires! It even rains here!"

Lucius smirked and held out his hand briefly. "Here, love, have some rain." He splashed a few drops on her face, making her shriek, then untied the parchment as the owl flew out of the window. Lucius laughed, threw the parchment on the bed, and headed for the door.

*If you're decent, kindly open the door!* Hermione read, and her eyes followed Lucius's form.

He opened the door. "Have you ever known me to be decent?"

"Hello to you, too, old man!"

Hermione's eyes widened. Despite not having heard it in over twenty years, she would have recognised that voice anywhere. Her next thought dealt with the fact that Severus Snape did not look even one year older than she remembered him. Next, she realised that she was in bed, as stark-naked as Lucius, and as unembarrassed. That thought was quickly forgotten as she watched the two men uninhibitedly engaging in a snogging session.

The sight of her lover kissing a man mesmerised her, wiping any coherent thought from her mind. She never noticed the sparks flying from her fingertips or the fact that the blanket had slid off her naked form, nor did she realise that the men had stopped kissing now and, instead, regarded her with open curiosity and some satisfaction.

"Hermione..."

"Miss Granger. Your magic is working well. Or would that *bemagick*?" Snape's smirk was very much like Lucius's, Hermione thought.

"What... what happened?" she asked when she finally found her voice.

"Your magic flared, love, is all," Lucius said lightly.

"Flared?"

Both men chuckled. "Yes, indeed. It's a rare sight these days, with so many restrictions in place," Snape said, still regarding her curiously, but without any typical male, predatory look, despite the fact that her body was exposed from her torso up.

Hermione hurried to cover herself, causing Lucius to laugh.

"Oh, love, no need to be modest," he said. "Severus and I share most secrets if not all, and he's had his fair share of my enthusiastic descriptions where your body is concerned. Your mind as well!"

Hermione felt herself blush. Before she could say something, Snape came to her rescue.

"I hear you're in need of someone to hack computers, Miss Granger."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Yes..."

"Always business before pleasure," Lucius grumbled.

"Why, yes, Lucius, old man. It makes the pleasure afterwards far more... pleasurable." Snape quirked his eyebrow at Lucius.

Hermione could not help but laugh. Snape sounded so like... Snape. Lucius was barely six years his senior, but only Snape would get away with calling him old.

"You can hack computers?" she asked incredulously. Not enough that he had risen from the dead, but he hacked computers, too.

Snape smirked. "I can. I even will, provided it's for a good cause."

She grinned and sought Lucius's eyes. "You knew, didn't you?"

Lucius smirked. "I did." Then his face turned serious. "But would you have believed me if I'd told you who I had in mind?"

"Probably not," Hermione admitted. "I'm game." Turning to Snape, she asked, "What information do you need?"

"Passwords would be a good start."

"Mine?" she asked, disbelief evident in her voice.

"No, I'm not interested in yours, dear. And I guess you don't have any of the Wilsons' passwords."

"No, I don't." She felt silly.

"No worries. I'll give you my computer's ISP and you can ping it when you get back to work. We'll take it from there. Oh, give me an idea what folder you keep the Wilson *chronicles* in."

She shared her information, and then, Lucius asked, "How about breakfast? I know it's still fairly early, but we're all up, and I'm hungry."

The prospect of breakfast somehow made Hermione forget that she would have to get to the bathroom within Snape's sight. *I'm not a prude, and no doubt he's seen a naked woman before...* she thought to herself, slid the blanket off and got up, avoiding both Lucius's and Snape's eyes as she headed for the bathroom.

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A/N: For details of the prompt, please see chapter 1.

Grateful thanks go to southernwitch69 for making this more readable. For correct writing, thank her. For mistakes, blame me.

# Nine

## Chapter 9 of 20

Sightseeing and shopping can be a lot of fun.

Disclaimer: Not mine. If you recognise it, it belongs to JKR. If you don't, it likely belongs to me. Except the wild theories of there being life inside the earth. Those are the ideas of either conspiracy theorists or Jules Verne. No ice was melted for this fic, nor did the desert sun cause burns.

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After breakfast, Hermione, Lucius, and Snape ventured out for some sightseeing. The rain had stopped, but it was still cloudy and fairly cool. "I've never thought I'd appreciate clouds and cool weather this much," Hermione said as Lucius took her hand.

"It's lovely, isn't it? I think living in Phoenix puts anyone off hot and sunny weather." The three strolled down a wide road, which was obviously one of the main shopping streets for Muggles, with heavy traffic, wide pavements that were nearly empty, and large shops and department stores, some just opening, others already filled with people browsing and shopping.

Snape, walking on the other side of Lucius, shook his head. "I'll never understand why you chose Phoenix of all places."

"Oh, but I'm glad I did!" Lucius exclaimed. "Had I chosen a different place, I would never have got to know Hermione, and my life would be seriously lacking!" Lucius wound his arm around Hermione's shoulder and pulled her closer. "And besides, Taliesin West is ever so comfortable!"

Snape smirked at the couple, who, oblivious to everything, were cuddling and kissing, and pointed to a side road. "Let's go to San Telmo. It's rather more authentic Argentinean than this part of town."

"So, you know Buenos Aires?" Hermione asked Snape. She had no idea how to address him. He had not been a professor in over twenty years, so calling him *Professor Snape* seemed redundant; *Mr Snape* sounded awkward in her mind, but *Severus* would have been too intimate an address so soon after they met.

Snape shrugged. "I come here at least once every month for business reasons. Some dwellers of Agharta like to visit for a breath of fresh air, change of environment, and some tend to invite me along. And over the course of twenty years, one can't help but get to know the place."

"So," drawled Lucius, "how is *Gadabout's Amazing Youth* doing?" His smirk bordered on glee.

Snape rolled his eyes. "Have you ever known G.A.Y. *tonot* do extremely well?"

Hermione's eyes widened. "You? I... I always thought they were Muggle-owned. Everyone uses them, Muggles and wizards alike!"

Lucius cleared his throat exaggeratedly, promptly causing Snape to roll his eyes at him again.

"Not everyone, Miss Granger. Your *partner* here..." he sneered slightly, "...deems conditioner for the masses unworthy of his precious hair, no matter how superior the product."

Lucius nodded, apparently satisfied. "Of course. Only the *very* best for my hair." Turning to Hermione, he explained, "Severus makes this particular conditioner solely for me."

Hermione was unable to suppress a snort. If she didn't know just how masculine Lucius was, she'd easily mistake him for a woman in a man's body, considering his obsession with perfect hair, perfect clothing, and perfectly shaven skin. "Why am I not surprised," she muttered.

Snape quirked his eyebrow. "You know him well."

Hermione laughed until an abrupt change of scenery distracted her. The houses had become much smaller, very colourful, and accordion music, unmistakably tango, drifted across. The road here was closed to cars, and increasing numbers of people mingled about, watching sellers set up stalls to offer their wares and animatedly exchanging words with others.

Hermione stopped when they reached a band of young people, none older than late teens, all dressed in colourful, long-flowing dresses or harem pants and comfortable-looking shirts, some playing accordion, others various types of drums. There was no reading music involved; they simply played, and to her ears, it sounded perfect.

"Would you like to dance, milady?" Lucius purred into her ear, making her body shudder in delight. Not waiting for an answer, he turned her to face him, placed one hand on her shoulder, took her hand with the other, and stepped to the beat of the music.

Whilst she'd had plenty of practise with waltz and foxtrot at various Ministry events over the years, Hermione had not tangoed since her dancing lessons during summer holidays as a teenager. But it mattered not: Lucius made an excellent partner, leading her expertly and with ease. She soon gave herself entirely to the music, oblivious to Snape's smirk, unaware of a crowd of people forming, who watched with interest the unlikely white couple dancing in the midst of locals to the unique rhythm that was the tango, swaying to the music themselves.

Snippets of Spanish conversation drifted across, but Hermione paid no attention until she made out Snape's voice. *He sounds even more elegant in Spanish*, she pondered lazily, too engrossed in the sensual movement of the dance to dwell on any thought for long.

"Hacen un par hermoso."

"Oh, puenos que ella paraceria mejor conmigo."

"¿Porque no lo pruebas?"

She wondered briefly what he was saying, whether he knew the other person, but there was no point dwelling on it...without a translation charm, she had no idea what was being said. Hermione felt his eyes on her back and could not help but wonder what he was thinking.

The music stopped, and the crowd applauded enthusiastically. "It seems I'm getting competition." Lucius smirked and pointed to Snape, who was heading towards the

couple.

"Lucius," Snape bowed perfunctorily, "if you don't mind."

Lucius nodded and stepped aside. The music started once more, and again, it was unmistakably tango. Snape was as good a dancer as Lucius, Hermione realised soon, his movements as fluid, and there was a gentleness to the way he led her that Hermione found almost startling.

"So, Miss Granger, how has life been treating you?" He sounded genuinely interested.

"Not bad at all. I'm content with my personal life. If now we find a way to regain control of ourselves rather than having our lives *managed* by the Ministry, I'll be very happy," Hermione said.

"It is a serious issue," Snape agreed. "But nothing that can't be resolved, now that we have the support of half a million people who are very aware, not only of the situation but also of what goes on behind the scenes."

The music finished once more, the crowd applauded again, and Snape bowed theatrically. "Thank you for the dance."

"Say, love, did you enjoy dancing with Severus as much as with me?" Lucius had reappeared and looked questioningly at Hermione.

She laughed. "I enjoyed dancing with *both* of you tremendously. Thank you," she said, her voice filled with amusement.

"Only winners, how elegantly put," Snape said and, turning to Lucius, smirked. "And by the way, the question was who looked better with Miss Granger, and clearly, I do. Black obviously contrasts much more effectively with lime-green than bottle-green does."

"You would say that," Lucius grumbled, but the mirthful expression he carried belied his tone, and Hermione did not quite manage to suppress a giggle.

The three continued walking around San Telmo, occasionally stopping to listen to live music or to admire the wares street vendors were offering, ranging from kitchen utensils to silk rugs, from t-shirts to evening gowns, from car parts of questionable origin with US price tags to brand-new appliances.

Hermione was amazed by the variety. "Is there anything they don't sell?"

"Indeed," Snape said. "If you want lingerie or more elegant clothing, then you're better off at Libertador at the Palermo end. It isn't far from here."

"Clothes!" Lucius exclaimed. "I've not shopped in ages. And, oh, darling, I just realise I've never bought lingerie for you! Let's put this to rights! Severus, love, do Apparate us, would you?"

Before Hermione could think of an answer, let alone wonder if each one of Lucius's previous partners had been gifted with lingerie, both Lucius and Snape took her hand on either side, and she felt the familiar tug of Apparition, instantly finding herself in what was no doubt the more elite shopping area of Buenos Aires. Large windows displayed elegant gowns, dresses, coats, and jackets, none with price tags. Forgotten was the fact that her lover, accompanied by his lover, was about to shop underwear for her.

"Oh, just look at this! Isn't it gorgeous?" Her eyes set on a deep...almost black...burgundy dress of an almost modest, yet classy design, lingerie-shopping forgotten. Next to it was a coat, more reminiscent of a cloak, cut in a fashion that screamed of a spectacular waste of fabric. She had no doubt it would billow far more dramatically than those Professor Snape had worn during her school years.

Lucius regarded her critically. "Yes," he said slowly, "this will look good on you." Turning to Snape, he asked, "Don't you think so?"

Snape nodded. "Indeed. Even though it reminds me of Gryffindor colours." His sneer was half-hearted at best.

Hermione grinned. "And here I am, not having thought about House affiliation in years!" She turned her eyes back to the gown. "I think I want to try this on."

"You should." Two voices appeared as one.

She walked into the shop, followed closely by the two men, and nearly gasped at the elegant interior. Except for the clothing, everything was in white and steel-grey...or stainless steel. Racks were holding dresses and gowns in a terraced manner, showing off each item. Other, higher-hung, slowly moving racks held suits and coats, and lower ones displayed jackets. Floor-to-ceiling mirrors lined those parts of the walls that weren't hidden by clothes. Everything inside spoke of timeless elegance, perfectly understated, for there was no need for any bragging if one could afford this kind of clothing.

Lucius must have been equally impressed, Hermione thought, as he had evidently forgotten to apply the translation charm. When a sales lady approached the trio, he looked as lost as Hermione, and she was grateful that at least Snape had a grasp of the language.

He exchanged words with her, and she disappeared briefly to return with the burgundy dress. The sales lady nodded at Hermione and motioned for her to follow to the changing rooms.

The dress not only fit perfectly, it seemed to be made for her. Its deeply dark burgundy brought out that hardly-ever-there shimmer of crimson in her hair better than the sun ever had, and her eyes seemed to have acquired a sheen she'd never seen before.

"Ah, yes," Lucius said when she came out. "It is perfect for you."

Snape smirked. "Not bad..." He turned his attention to the suits. "I think I might indulge..."

More than an hour later, the trio finally exited the exclusive outlet, each one carrying a rather large bag. "Please, let's find a spot where we can reduce all this. I *am not* going to carry this monstrosity for the rest of the day," Lucius complained.

Hermione and Snape smirked, and Hermione took Lucius's hand. "Oh, you poor thing. Carrying a bag must be such a chore."

"Are you mocking me?" Lucius failed at sounding stern.

"Of course she is, Lucius." Snape cast her a look of...was that approval Hermione detected in his expression? Then he continued his banter with Lucius. "Anyone who has known you for more than a couple of hours knows what a spoiled prat you are!"

Hermione snickered. She could not imagine anyone else to get away with calling her partner spoiled.

Lucius had the grace to look somewhat uncomfortable. "Well... I'll admit some have led tougher lives..."

Snape motioned to a side road. "We can turn here. It'll be empty after a few yards down. Can't have you all exhausted from carrying a suit, now can we?"

The houses here were residential, and the further the three walked along, the emptier the road became. Snape motioned for Hermione and Lucius to stop, looked around, and silently reduced the sizes of their bags to fit into a pocket or purse. "Now, then," he said. "Back to the hotel? We have a couple of hours before meeting with Lola and Karl."

"Oh yes!" Hermione exclaimed. In a quieter tone, she added, "I could really do with a shower."

"Naturally, you'll be wearing your brand-new dress," Lucius stated. "And we'll have to return here tomorrow to engage in some lingerie shopping."

"Of course, and that's fine. I don't think I have the energy to do more shopping and then go out for dinner," Hermione agreed. She had not particularly cared for new clothing during the last years of her marriage, but she had remembered rather quickly the joy and satisfaction of choosing and wearing something brand-new and exquisite. Nevertheless, a shower sounded more enticing than lingerie shopping at that moment.

The three Apparated to the front of the hotel and entered. The lobby was deserted. It appeared that Pedro enjoyed his siesta as much as the next Argentinean, although Hermione had no doubt that appropriate wards kept any undesired visitors away.

Lucius fell unceremoniously onto his side of the bed. "Oh, I do so enjoy some culture and a good shopping spree, but it is tiring!"

Snape sat down in the chair on the other side of the bedside table. "You are getting old, aren't you?" he said casually and smirked at his friend before bending down to open the laces of his shoes, which promptly scuttled off his feet, across the floor, to settle beneath the wardrobe.

As fascinated as Hermione was by the two men's banter, her mind could only envision a hot shower. Cities in general, and by the feel of it Buenos Aires in particular, always left her feeling as if there was a layer of grime on her skin, which demanded to be washed off at the earliest opportunity. She carefully chose her clothes and headed to the shower. "Back shortly."

Enjoying the feel of the hot water washing off the day's dirt and energetic imprints, Hermione sighed contentedly. She had thoroughly enjoyed Snape's company, as surprising as that realisation was. Like Lucius, he had changed dramatically over the course of twenty years. Then she snickered to herself. *As if I haven't changed just as much...* she thought as she took a deep, appreciative sniff of the bottle of *Gadabout's Amazing Youth* petitgrain-scented conditioner. She could not help grinning how Snape had fooled the world, having developed one of the most successful cosmetics businesses in complete secrecy.

Suddenly, she stopped massaging the conditioner into her scalp. *What if... what if he adds some kind of clarifying-mind potion into the products... Would that wake up the world to what's going on?*

Fascinated with the thought and wanting to discuss it immediately, she hurried through her routine and switched the water off, then dried her body hurriedly and equally hurriedly, but carefully, dressed and opened the door into the bedroom.

Her eyes widened, and something, somewhere deep inside her stirred a yet unknown desire into existence.

The two men were lying on the bed, their limbs entangled, arms around each other, hands massaging the other's shoulders and stomach, dressed down to only their briefs.

A moan...Hermione could only think of it as blissful...escaped Lucius when Snape deftly licked his nipple, first the right, then the left.

"Yessss," came Lucius's hiss.

Hermione stood rooted to the ground, desperately trying to fill her mind with anything but this desire that had overwhelmed her the moment she'd laid eyes on them. It was the most erotic vision she'd ever seen and certainly not one she would have imagined out of her own accord.

Her presence must have entered the men's consciousness, for each suddenly turned into her direction.

Snape smirked at the sight of her, and Lucius quirked his eyebrow. "Darling. Like what you see?" He looked positively amused, Hermione could not help noticing. As did Snape, for that matter.

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A/N: For details of the prompt, please see chapter 1.

Grateful thanks go to southernwitch69 for making this more readable. For correct writing, thank her. For mistakes, blame me.

# Ten

*Chapter 10 of 20*

Back in Phoenix, not all is well.

Disclaimer: Not mine. If you recognise it, it belongs to JKR. If you don't, it likely belongs to me. Wild theories of the earth being hollow do exist. Blame it on Jules Verne if you like. No tango was insulted for this chapter, nor was any paper wasted. The electrons in the computer might be slightly miffed, though.

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"I... I'm sorry," she said lamely, angry with her blood for pooling straight to her face, angry with her body for not letting her mind control this entirely uncalled-for desire, angry with her lungs for betraying her with rapid, short, ragged breaths, angry with herself for being wholly unreasonable about this whole situation.

The quick look Lucius exchanged with Snape did not escape her, and she wondered if she'd ever mean as much to him as Snape obviously did. An exchange of deep understanding that needed no words passed between the two men, and Lucius stood up and walked towards her in one swift movement, spreading his arms to invite her in.

Hermione readily accepted and leaned her head against his chest, her breathing slowing down to a more normal level.

"Love, what's wrong?" Lucius asked. "Are you upset because we were pleasuring each other, or are you upset about your own reaction?"

"It's... I've known pretty much from the beginning that I share you. Thankfully, you've never made that a secret," she said quietly. "I think... I didn't expect to find the sight erotic." She sighed. Telling him the honest answer was as important as it was difficult.

He patted her gently on the back. "Who would've thought, eh? And you were so vehement watching us wouldn't turn you on." He sounded satisfied, and Hermione could not suppress a grin, glad he wasn't able to see it.

She slapped his arm. "Always have to be right, don't you?" she grumbled, but with a mirthful voice.

When she heard the bathroom door close, she looked up. "Oh. I hope Snape doesn't mind to be so rudely interrupted."

Lucius laughed. "No, darling, he doesn't mind, I'm sure. But if we don't get ready soon, too, we'll be late for dinner." With that, he released her and headed toward the dresser, chose some clothes, and sat down on the chair to wait for his other partner to vacate the bathroom, watching her with interest. "You do look fantastic in that dress." He nodded approvingly.

"Why, she really does." Snape stood in the door, looking at her with a look she could only consider to be approving.

Lucius looked up at his partner and smirked. "That was quick." He got up and headed towards the bathroom while Snape moved towards the just vacated chair.

"You better hurry, old man. I don't like the idea of making Lola and Karl wait," he called after Lucius. A grunt was his only response.

Hermione finally remembered the idea she'd had in the shower and turned to Snape. "Sir, have you ever thought including some kind of awareness potion to G.A.Y. products?"

He looked at her sharply, and she faltered, feeling as if transported back to Hogwarts during her schoolgirl days and fully expecting to receive a dressing-down ripe with sarcasm.

His answer, with its frankness as well as its lack of sardonic tints, surprised her. "Lola and I have been working on it, and the latest batch includes some new... ingredients. All less than five percent, of course, so we do not have to list them, as some countries just love to analyse them to find fault." He looked at her steadily, and then continued. "It is, in fact, a derivative of Veritaserum, only that it tugs at the subconscious more than the original potion."

"Oh..." Hermione felt lost for words. Then her mind started churning. "What... what do you expect will be the result? The idea only occurred to me in the shower, and I've not had any time to think it over at all. Do you think it'll wake up Muggles as well? And I bet there are some of the powerful Muggles who use G.A.Y. potions, what about them?" She stopped, feeling sheepish. "Sorry, I'm babbling," she added.

Snape chuckled. "Yes, I do believe anyone who uses G.A.Y. will wake up, if only gradually. It'll be interesting to watch the headlines in the near future, I'd say. And yes, of course it'll affect anyone who uses them." Then he turned serious. "Miss Granger, I do not perceive..."

"...Oh, would you please stop calling me that! It makes me feel like a thirteen-year-old in your dungeons classroom!"

He chuckled again. "*Hermione*, I do not perceive what you said as *babbling*. Your idea has merit, perfectly so. Only, I arrived there first. In fact, the original idea was to develop a potion that would open up the mind to one's higher self. Unfortunately, I've not arrived at a conclusion. Yet."

She breathed. In. Out. In. Out. In out. Inout, inout. "Okay."

"Are you all ready, then?" Lucius had finally finished in the shower.

"Yes, dear. Just waiting for you."

"Let's go, then!" Turning to Snape, he said, "You know where to go, so Apparate us, will you?"

Holding one hand with Lucius and the other with Snape felt comfortable, Hermione decided.

---

The remainder of the weekend had flown by too fast, and before she knew it, Hermione found herself facing another day at work.

Parting with Snape was harder than she'd imagined, and that was after a tearful parting with Lola and Karl. "I... Oh gods! I don't know what to say! This has been incredible, meeting you after so many years, and... and I still don't know how to address you!" Hermione was unable to suppress the tears and looked down in embarrassment.

Snape chuckled. He put an arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer. "I'm delighted to see how well you've been doing. I've always had faith in you. Even though my behaviour suggested differently." He paused for a moment. "Hermione." He said her name slowly, as if to taste it. "And since I call you by your first name, how about you try to do the same?" He chuckled again in that deep voice of his that made her almost tremble.

"Severus," she whispered, tasting his name on her tongue while snuggling closer to him.

"That's it," he said. "And don't stay away too long."

"I won't." She turned away from him, took Lucius's hand, and together, they Apparated.

"Home, sweet home," Lucius said as they arrived in front of Taliesin West.

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When Hermione arrived at her office, a hawk was waiting for her outside the window. She headed straight for the window, opened it, and let the bird in. Only one wizard utilised hawks to send private correspondence. "I don't have any live feed, but if you fly exactly north from here, you'll find an old house overrun with rodents," she said to the bird as she untied the parchment. The bird seemed unperturbed and took straight off again.

*Dear Hermione,*

*It was great to hear from you, but, you know, you could occasionally write like a friend rather than just sticking to whatever it is that's on your mind. I miss you. When are you coming back? Or do you like snakes too much to leave now? Anyway, I had to do some digging around to even half-answer your question. There is a "black" fund, which is fed by the Muggle government. Someone, and I have no idea who, fooled then-Prime Minister, Tony Blair, into signing a contract that pays the Ministry one percent of all income tax received. Allegedly, it was signed so the Muggle government would always be informed about any important things going on in our world, such as the rise of Voldemort and so on. The Ministry immediately turns the pounds into gold, and that is what's been used to fund all the surveillance, Portkey stations, and apparently some of it goes into bribing Ministry officials so laws can be changed with the majority in order to keep up the appearance of democracy.*

*Now, how about planning to see each other? Are you coming over any time soon? Or do I have to make my way to Phoenix?*

*Love,*

*Harry*

Hermione felt guilt sear through her; she really had been neglecting her best friend. She'd been in such a hurry to send the letter off to him that including anything personal had never even occurred to her. A sigh escaped her, and she made a mental note to write a long, personal letter to Harry in the next few days. Then she folded the parchment and put it in her bag, planning to show it to Lucius in the evening.

His voice drifting into her office interrupted her train of thought abruptly. *What on earth is he doing here?* He normally only came to pick her up for lunch or at the end of the day, and not often.

"Would you happen to know why Edwina Wilson, who has not been part of this department in over a year, felt the need to *visit* this place on a Sunday, Abigail?"

Hermione couldn't hear Abigail's answer, but Lucius's question alone hurried her out of her office into the reception area. The sight of her lover towering over a very wide-eyed receptionist surprised her.

"Lucius, what's happening?"

Lucius rose and turned to face her. "Hello, love. I've learned that Edwina Wilson took it upon herself to sneak into your office yesterday. Now, what does that tell us?" He looked at her evenly.

"I had no idea," Abigail said, her voice trembling, but Hermione was certain it was out of fear and not out of the need to hide something. The receptionist wasn't the brainiest, but Hermione had no reason to believe she might not be loyal to her. "I've not seen Edwina since she left for England."

"Oh, I am surprised," Hermione said, "that it took her this long. I guess we better check my office for bugs." She motioned for Lucius to follow her back to her office, then turned back to Abigail. "Don't worry about it, Abigail. I'll find out what the hell is going on here."

Back in her office, Hermione took a deep breath. "How did you find out?"

"I'll tell you as soon as we are somewhere I know isn't infested with listening devices," Lucius said, his tone serious.

Hermione nodded. "Yes. That's a good idea." She sat down at her desk, sighing. "I don't know what to make of this. I feel... violated." She put her head in her hands.

Lucius put one arm around her shoulder and his hand below her chin to lift it. "Sneaking in here when nobody is around, and she knew that the office would be deserted on a Sunday, is not acceptable, Hermione. Ministry employees have been sacked for lesser violations."

"Yes, but how can we prove she was here?" Hermione asked, looking at him.

Lucius smirked. "I have proof. Although... you might not like how I came about it."

Her mind started churning, but she forced herself to let it go. She wouldn't be able to talk about it right there, not while there was danger of someone in favour of controlling the wizarding world catching the conversation.

He bent down and whispered, "Go about your working day like normal. Just don't have any private conversations. But do what we discussed over the weekend with our friend. I will deal with having your office cleared of any devices she might have installed by tomorrow morning. When you're done here, come to my place. We can talk more freely there." He kissed her and left.

*Do what we discussed...* Hermione had to think for a moment before the answer hit her. Then she grinned to herself and switched her computer on. As soon as the internet connection came on, she pinged Snape's computer. It worked.

Given the privacy violation, Hermione decided to go to a library to send Snape...no, Severus...the information he'd need to remotely access her computer. It was too early for lunch yet, and she had no intention of drawing attention to her person in any way. *What if that Wilson woman arranged to spy on me further? What if she has some of her minions follow my every step?* Then she rolled her eyes at herself. *You're getting paranoid...*

Unable to shake off the feeling of unease, Hermione was staring at her computer screen when an owl whooshed through the open window. She untied the parchment.

*Love, don't use your computer for any private correspondence, and don't go out to send it. They're probably watching you. Let me know if I can do anything for you in the meantime. Or come home at your earliest convenience. L.*

Hermione took a deep breath. *Not paranoid, then. Merely realistic.* The realisation made her slightly queasy.

Then, with a sudden clarity from unknown sources, Hermione knew she had to break the one rule she'd held sacred for all her working life: skive off work.

Her mind made up instantly, she shut down her computer, grabbed her bag, and headed out of her office. Hermione stopped briefly at Abigail's desk. "Abigail, I don't feel so well. I'll take the rest of the day off. If you need me, send an owl."

Abigail looked at her with big eyes. "I hope you get better, Miss Hermione," she offered. "You don't look well..."

"I'm sure I'll be fine tomorrow, thanks," Hermione said dismissively and turned to the door. As soon as she reached the street, she cast a cursory glance in all directions to check that the road was empty and Apparated straight to Taliesin West.

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A/N: For details of the prompt, please see chapter 1.

Grateful thanks go to southernwitch69 for making this more readable. For correct writing, thank her. For mistakes, blame me.

## Eleven

*Chapter 11 of 20*

In which a Patronus is seen, champagne is had, and someone disappears.

Disclaimer: The ownership hasn't changed; if you recognise it, it belongs to JKR. If you don't, it likely belongs to me. Wild theories of the earth being hollow abound. Blame it on Admiral Byrd if you like. No paper was wasted, but the electrons in the computer are still mightily miffed.

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Hermione stopped dead in her tracks at the door to the living room. A lion-shaped, larger-than-life Patronus sprinted past her before dissolving as Lucius exclaimed, "Yes! I did it!"

Her eyes widened as he looked at her with an expression of smugness mixed with pride...and eyes that shone bright with accomplishment. Hermione's legs carried her to him out of their own accord. "You cast a Patronus? For the first time?" She walked readily into his open, inviting arms.

"I did." He lifted her chin to look into her eyes. "Hermione. I'm not a Death Eater anymore. I really *am not* a Death Eater." His eyes conveyed triumph.

"Of course you're not. You haven't been in a long time, Lucius, and I doubt your heart was ever fully in it," she said softly, vividly remembering a much younger but far more worn Lucius at the end of Voldemort's reign.

His mouth crashed down on hers, and he kissed her greedily. Then he abruptly stopped. "Would you consider it bad form if I told you I'm madly in love with you?"

Hermione frowned. Then she failed to suppress a giggle. "I'd consider it... maybe not typical for you, love, but surely not bad form. Since I'm madly in love with you, I don't see anything whatsoever wrong with you feeling the same way." That he worried over his impeccable manners even when it came to matters of love amused her greatly.

"Oh, good!" He sounded relieved. "I don't see what's *not typical for me*, but as long as you don't think it's bad form..."

He lifted Hermione effortlessly and carried her to the bedroom. Then, placing her gently on the bed, he murmured, *Accio champagne*," conjured two flutes, and opened the bottle in mid-air. "I think we have reason to celebrate..."

He joined her on the bed, handing one glass to her. They sipped champagne in silence until Lucius's hand cupped her chin. Then slowly, it moved downward, caressing her neck, her left shoulder, her right shoulder, then coming to rest on her breast for a moment.

He put his glass down, mumbling, "I bet this will taste even better," and flicked his tongue over her erect nipple. "Mmh, yes," he growled lowly before turning his attention back to tasting her skin.

Hermione barely managed to put her glass down and sighed in anticipation of more pleasure. The talent of his hands and mouth never ceased to amaze her, and she idly wondered if she'd still feel this way in ten or twenty years. His hair fell over his face, tickling the sensitive skin of her breasts. She tangled her hands in his hair and sighed again contentedly, revelling in the exquisite texture of his silken hair between her fingers.

"So beautiful," he breathed and lifted his head to capture her mouth in another kiss. Tongues savoured each other's taste, explored one another, stroked against each other.

Then, feathery kisses made their way back to her breast, first one, then the other, making her writhe with pleasure. His mouth slowly moved downward, placing more light flicks and kisses down her ribs, her stomach, until it came to a brief halt at her centre, his hands now busy flicking her nipples and rubbing his thumb over one, then the other.

The sensation of his tongue flicking lightly over the front of her centre broke loose the sensation of completion deep inside. Anticipating, her hips arched upward, causing him to growl.

"Yes..." Her body arched further toward him until his fingers delved into her, shattering her entirely, barely aware that her body was welcoming his quick entrance only moments before he spilled himself within her.

The shift in energy was subtle. So subtle, it nearly escaped both of them. As Hermione snuggled against Lucius, she realised it was the same perception she'd had after they'd made love on the beach weeks ago. "Lucius... did you feel it?"

"Hm... Now that you ask... it was like that time on the beach..." He turned to look at her. "I wonder what will happen now. Did you concentrate on any goal?"

Hermione looked away. "N...no. I didn't."

Lucius grinned. "It's okay, love. Sometimes it is necessary to focus on pleasure alone." Then his face turned serious. "I asked because the last time it happened, we were both making a conscious effort to concentrate on a goal, and this time, neither of us did, and yet, the shift in energy happened. At least that's what we both thought."

Hermione thought for a moment. "I wonder if it's my subconscious...*our* subconscious."

"What do you mean?" Lucius frowned.

"Well... I was rather worked up over Edwina visiting my office." Talking of the Wilson witch reminded her of a more important issue. "Oh! how *did* you find out?"

Lucius smirked. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Yes, you tease!"

Still smirking, Lucius said, "Draco informed me."

"Draco?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"Well, you see... He's no longer Potter's enemy. In fact, they've become rather friendly, and when Potter complained about some new control measures the Ministry had imposed a couple of weeks ago, Draco offered to put a tracking charm on Edwina Wilson, who is presently the prime suspect of this entire control issue...we're not the only ones suspicious of her. Draco's business deals with both Muggle and wizarding security, so it was rather easy for him to put the tracking charm on her unnoticed."

"Oh... I see." Hermione had known that Harry and Draco had become quite friendly over the years, meeting occasionally for a pint at the Leaky Cauldron, but she'd had no idea that Draco would involve himself in politics. It suddenly dawned on her that he was, indeed, his father's son, and she couldn't help but grin at the realisation.

"What's funny?" Lucius promptly asked.

"Oh, it's just... Draco is far more like you than I realised."

"You must understand that having spent years as a follower of the Dark Lord has made us not only allergic to any form of outside control but also fine-tuned us to recognise it from miles away. That goes for Draco, who spent at least part of his teen years with the excessive control the Dark Lord exercised over us, my family more so than anyone else, as much as for myself, Hermione," Lucius said.

He had a point, Hermione admitted. "I understand," she said quietly.

Lucius locked eyes with her. "Now, do tell, what about your subconscious?"

Hermione blinked, and it took her a moment to realise what he was referring to. "I was wondering if a goal now naturally makes up a part of love-making. We practised so often, with so much intensity, with so much effort, that I'd not be surprised if having that goal of freedom...true freedom...somehow subconsciously in our minds whenever we make love. Hence the energy shift." She took a deep breath and admitted, "I don't know. It was just a thought, almost fleeting, but I seem to have learned to follow my instinct more." A sudden forbearing fear washed over her, only subtly, but nevertheless noticeable. "Damn..." she muttered and nearly blushed seeing Lucius's intense expression as he watched her.

"What is it, love?"



Hermione shook her head. "Nothing. I just had a weird feeling that something is going to happen..."

"File it away until it returns. Let's enjoy the rest of the day."

Hermione nodded. He was right; there was no point fretting over something unknown. "So, you sent your Patronus to Severus?" she asked.

"I did indeed. It is wise to keep him up to date on any developments, and besides, he needed the information to get into your computer."

Of course. She had completely forgotten about that. Then another thought occurred to her. "Say, what proof do you have that that woman invaded my office?"

Lucius smirked slightly. "I did warn you that you might not like it, yes?" Upon Hermione's curt nod, he said, "Come. Let's go to the living room." He got up, picked up her bathrobe and tossed it at her, then put on his own and took the still half-full glass of champagne and the bottle. "Bring your glass. We might as well enjoy the rest of it."

Hermione followed him into the living room and sat down on the sofa. Lucius went to retrieve what looked like an oversized, sophisticated calculator from one of the shelves and then sat down next to her. "This," he explained smugly as he flipped open the device, "is a computer. Connected to a camera." He suddenly looked somewhat shifty, Hermione observed.

"And pray tell, Lucius, dear, where is that camera located?" It had not taken her long to put two and two together. He might be Slytherin, but she read him well.

"Ah, yes, erm, that is the part you won't like," he said, sounding sheepish.

Hermione quirked her eyebrow. "Yes?"

Lucius uttered an exaggerated sigh. "Actually, to be perfectly truthful, it was not my idea. When I went to visit Sev last summer and shared my...our...suspicions with him, and then with Lola and Karl, we brainstormed for possible solutions. Karl especially insisted we'd put some safety and security devices around you because you would eventually come to the Wilsons' attention. And make no mistake, love, they *are* dangerous. They have family as well as friends in the highest places, and to cover up murder means nothing to them. They wouldn't fire you, Hermione...they'd get rid of you once and for all."

"And?" Hermione prompted, ignoring the dire warning for now.

"And... so... we Apparated back to Phoenix for a night and installed a hidden camera in your office. Well, Severus did. I... made sure he did it right." Lucius nodded in confirmation.

Hermione laughed. "I'm sure you did, love." She looked at him questioningly. "So? Are you going to show me what the camera recorded?" It was impossible to be angry with him for being concerned for her safety, even if it meant an invasion of her privacy. She would not even attempt it.

Lucius tapped a few keys on the small keyboard, and the screen showed her office. For the first few seconds, her office appeared empty. The camera was obviously installed high up in a corner, covering almost the entire room, with her desk and the computer screen prominently showing. Suddenly, a woman entered and swiftly made her way to the desk. She switched on the computer, curiously looking around while waiting. She carelessly opened one drawer after another, occasionally pulling out some parchment to read. Just as the computer jumped to life, she answered her cell phone.

Lucius increased the volume on the computer.

"What is it?" Edwina appeared to listen intently and said, "Oh, really? Let me try." She punched characters into the keyboard and paled. "Fuck it, you're right. I can't get in. Let me try again." Edwina punched more characters into the keyboard, more violently this time, but the screen remained blank. "Fuck this. The bitch obviously knows a thing about computer security. Damn! What are we going to do now?"

Hermione was wide-eyed. "Lucius! What is this about? I know just about enough to password-protect my stuff, and I don't trust anyone not to hack it!"

Lucius paused the video and grinned. "When we visited, Severus made sure nobody but you can get into your computer."

Hermione groaned. "Is there anything else you might want to tell me?" Such protective measures were great, only she wondered how far this protection would lead.

"Hermione, love, look at it from a practical point of view. You wouldn't want any Wilson to know about visiting all those genealogy sites, would you?"

"No. But if I'd known those idiots can't access it, I could have saved lots of notes!"

"I'm sorry, love. Maybe I should have told you earlier. On the other hand, I wasn't sure how you'd react to it. But I couldn't bear the thought of losing you, you know?" He sounded wistful.

"Don't be sorry," Hermione whispered. "It's just... I... This is a lot to take in."

"I understand. But please know that we only had your well-being in mind," Lucius urged her.

"Yes..." That foreboding hunch hit her again. "Damn..."

"What is it?"

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know... I've just had another hunch of something coming up..."

"Oh, love." He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer. "Want to see the rest of the video?"

"Yes."

Lucius pressed the pause button again, and Hermione watched and listened as Edwina used more expletives and tried more combinations to gain access to her computer. None of them worked. Then she spoke into the phone again. "I'll see what more I can extract out of my retard shag buddy. Gimme a week or so."

Hermione was unable to suppress a shudder at that. "I have no feelings left for Ron. But seriously *retard shag buddy?* Poor guy..."

"Potter put a spell tracking charm on him a few weeks ago. He thinks there is something amiss currently. Draco told me." Lucius sounded tired.

Hermione looked at him and noticed his worried features. "Lucius, love, please don't think I have any feelings whatsoever for Ron. Even when we broke up, it was more hurt pride than actual love for him, beyond him being the father of my children... Fuck. There's been no owl from Rose or Hugo!" Rose and Hugo had never failed to send an owl every Monday, no matter where they were. And they were at Hogwarts right now, even less reason to not send an owl to their mother.

Lucius started. "You're right. Oh, gods, I hope the owl is simply delayed."

"They were going to tell me today about which day I was to pick them up to spend the holidays here," she whispered as that feeling of foreboding disaster washed over her again, this time much more intensely, making her shudder violently. "Oh, Lucius..."

He pulled her even closer and hugged her tightly. "It'll be okay, love. I'm sure it was just owls getting held up by weather. You know what Britain is like in winter." He did not sound entirely convincing to her, but she welcomed the feel of him around her and snuggled up closer.

They sat there, together, for some time, each thinking idle thoughts, panicking internally, pondering food, when suddenly, there was a scratching at the window.

Lucius got up and headed to the window to let the owl in, which flew immediately to Hermione.

She untied the parchment from the unknown owl with shaking hands, realising with uncanny clarity that this was what she'd been subconsciously anticipating, dreading, and tore the parchment open.

"No... No no no no no!" She let herself fall onto the floor, unable to maintain control over her senses.

Lucius hurried to her and snatched the parchment out of her hand. Reading it, he paled.

*Hermione,*

*I hate to have to contact you like that, but I have no choice. Rose and Hugo were kidnapped out of Hogwarts this evening. From what I understand (what their friends said), each received an owl, and the moment they touched the parchment, they were gone. I'm with the headmistress right now and hope you'll have it in you to join us.*

*Ron*

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A/N: For details of the prompt, please see chapter 1.

Grateful thanks go to southernwitch69 for making this more readable. For correct writing, thank her. For mistakes, blame me.

## Twelve

*Chapter 12 of 20*

Interesting exchanges and interactions are taking place.

Disclaimer: I still don't own it; if you recognise it, it belongs to JKR. If you don't, it likely belongs to me. Wild theories of there being an entrance to the Inner Earth in the Mammoth Caves continue to abound. No paper wastage was involved, nor were any lives endangered. The electrons in the computer remain rather indignant, though.

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"Lucius." Hermione didn't sound herself, her voice far too rough.

"Love, let me Apparate us to Hogwarts, just give me a moment."

For the second time that day, she saw a lion Patronus pass her. "Oh, Lucius..." She felt utterly out of her depth. If any attack had been on her, she could have coped. But her children? Her innocent, beautiful, perfect children? Out of Hogwarts, the safest place for all children? It was inconceivable.

Lucius wrapped his arms around her tightly. "Don't fret, love. We'll have it under control in no time."

Hermione snorted derisively. "Yeah, right. Retrieve their bodies? You only just pointed out how ruthless the Wilsons are, you know?"

"Hermione, stop it! You're distraught! Just give me a few minutes. I've sent word to Severus, and he will, no doubt, help immediately."

His words had barely run out when a doe Patronus thundered through the walls into the living room. "Get your arse outside so I can come in! There's no time to be lost."

Lucius stood up in a hurry and rushed to the front door, Hermione following him closely.

Severus wasted no time. "Hermione! Send your Patronus to Potter to meet you with his Invisibility Cloak at the gates of Hogwarts." Turning to Lucius, he demanded, "Get me a piece of paper and a pencil. The Muggle kind!"

Lucius returned inside to fetch the requested items, and Hermione did as told, although it took her minutes to conjure a Patronus.

"Good. Now, let's Apparate."

She held Lucius's hand and put her other on Severus's arm. That dreaded forbearing of something horrible happening suddenly abated. She let out a sigh of relief.

Harry was already at the gate when the three appeared. He hugged Hermione fiercely. "I'm so sorry, mate! If there is anything I can do for you, just say the word. I have the entire department working on it." Then his jaw dropped when he saw Snape. "Pr-Professor Snape! You're alive..."

Snape inclined his head. "Evidently," he drawled. Then he sneered. "Not a word, Potter. I'm sure Hermione will explain once this mess is sorted out. Invisibility Cloak?"

Harry nodded and handed Snape the cloak, which the elder immediately put on. Now invisible, but with no less authority, he said, "Let's go."

If Harry noticed Hermione holding Lucius's hand, he refrained from commenting, for which she was grateful. She was in no state to explain her private life at this moment. Not until she'd have her children back safely.

Feeling Severus right behind her comforted her. Somehow, she had faith that between them, they'd find Rose and Hugo alive and well.

They walked silently to the front doors, which Harry opened, and then climbed up the large staircase to the headmistress's office. "I will leave as soon as I find what I need," Snape whispered into Hermione's ear. Then he addressed Harry. "Remember, Potter. Not a word about me."

The door was already open, and the group silently climbed up the spiral staircase.

Headmistress McGonagall stood up to greet the newcomers. "Harry, Lucius." Then she hugged Hermione. "Hermione! I'm so sorry we meet under such dire circumstances. I wish it were for a happier occasion!"

"Thank you, Professor," Hermione said quietly and sat down next to Lucius, feeling Snape's comforting presence right behind her. Only now did she realise they weren't alone. On the other side of the desk sat Ron and Edwina. He stood up awkwardly and walked towards Hermione.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione."

She disregarded his outstretched hand.

"Any news yet?" Hermione asked, her voice cold. *How dare he turn up with that... that bitch!* Hermione had no doubt Edwina was involved in the kidnapping if not the mastermind behind it.

Ron shook his head. Glancing at Harry, he said, "Nothing at all. The entire Aurory is on the case, and hopefully, they'll find them before long."

Lucius gazed at Edwina, intently enough to make her squirm. "You look familiar. I'm sure I've seen you before," he said casually.

Edwina schooled her face into a very thin-lipped smile. "I do not recall meeting you before, Mr Malfoy."

Hermione was surprised to see Lucius's almost feral grin as he replied, "Maybe I'm mistaken, Mrs Wilson." He made a show of smoothing his hair with his right hand and put his left arm around Hermione's shoulder.

Hermione gazed at Edwina and couldn't help but wonder if the witch had Confunded Ron. Or maybe she'd slipped him a love potion. She was slim to the point of bony. Her clothes were expensive, but lacked style. Her dirty-blond hair looked flat, in evident need of some styling, and her face was pinched.

Ron, having returned to his seat, frowned. "What's he doing here, anyway?"

"Lucius came with me because I was distressed, Ronald. Is that a problem?" Hermione managed to refrain from making a remark about Edwina's presence and instead opted to simply regard her with disdain.

"N-no. I was just wondering," Ron said lamely.

The door suddenly opened, seemingly out of its own accord, and then slammed shut. While everyone looked up and around in confusion, Lucius nudged Hermione and held the palm of his hand out to her. In it was a small piece of paper.

*She's responsible. Going now to retrieve youngsters. Will send Patronus when done.*

A tremendously heavy stone dropped from Hermione's heart. She looked at Lucius, who smiled. She smiled back, relieved. Everything would work out.

Their interaction had not gone unnoticed.

"Oh, such lovey-dovey behaviour," Edwina remarked, her tone laced with saccharine, her hand...surprisingly wrinkled for her age, Hermione noticed...finding its way to rest on Ron's leg.

"And why not, Mrs Wilson? Is there something wrong with that?" Lucius enquired mildly.

"No, no, go on, don't mind me."

"I don't."

Edwina rolled her eyes at him and turned to Ron. "Honey, do we need to stay here? Or could we leave and await news from home?" Her American accent was the kind Hermione hated.

Ron's face turned red, spectacularly clashing with his hair. "I suppose we could leave," he mumbled, not looking at anyone.

"Then let's go." Edwina stood.

Lucius quirked his eyebrow. "Really, Mrs Wilson. I see what you mean about retard shagging buddy."

Edwina's eyes widened to the size of saucers. Then her face turned red. Abruptly, she turned to Ron. "Let's go. NOW!" She dragged Ron by the hand and hurried out.

Lucius grinned.

Hermione grinned.

Harry embarrassedly shuffled his feet.

The headmistress looked lost.

Eventually, McGonagall asked, "What on earth was all this about?"

"Mrs Wilson took it upon herself to investigate Hermione's office on Sunday. Good thing we had the insight to expect such an occasion and have now evidence. The moment I receive confirmation that she did it without clearance, she'll be dead meat." Lucius sounded positively satisfied.

The headmistress looked at him with large eyes. "How dare she!" she exclaimed. Then, in a quieter tone, she added, "No wonder I disliked her instantly."

Harry shook his head. "I don't like her either. I have no idea what Ron sees in her. And I'm sure there's something fishy going on. Ron's become really different lately. Sometimes, I don't even like him."

"You should investigate that hunch, Potter," Lucius said. "We can do some things to thwart those forces, but personally, I have no interest in the fate of Mr Weasley and

rather spend my time to actively stop those idiots from taking over."

Harry looked at him. "I understand. And you're right, I should. I put a tracking charm on him a few weeks ago, but it took less than a day for it to be taken off, presumably by *her*." The last word was sneered.

A doe Patronus floated through the wall and stopped in front of Lucius and Hermione. "All is well," it said quietly before it dissolved.

The headmistress stared. "If I didn't know he's dead, I could've sworn that was Severus's Patronus," she whispered, visibly shaken.

Lucius made a show of standing up and stretched his hand out to Hermione. "It's time to leave. Come, let's make sure Rose and Hugo are okay." Turning to Harry, he said, "Would you like to join us, Potter? I believe you have something to retrieve."

Harry nodded silently and stood up.

"I suspect asking you to tell me what's happening exactly is asking too much," McGonagall said tartly, staring intently at Lucius and Hermione.

Hermione smiled at her. "I will tell you as soon as this is over. Right now, I want to make sure my children are safe and sound."

"Yes, Hermione. I understand completely. Do come by when you bring them back. Take your time. Both are bright enough to catch up a week or two of missing classes." Minerva smiled benignly at her once-favourite student.

Lucius, Hermione, and Harry exited the castle and walked back to the gates with much lighter hearts. "Hermione," Harry said, "can you tell me what the hell happened in there?" He pointed back to the castle.

Before Hermione was ready to answer, Lucius started, "Severus cast Legilimens on Edwina, and as soon as he found out where the children were, he left. That's how the door opened seemingly by itself. When he was done with the rescue mission, he sent his Patronus to inform us. And before you wonder, Potter, I don't know any other details. We shall find out shortly."

They had reached the gates now. "Where are we going now?" Harry asked.

"Back to Phoenix. Hold on to me, Harry," Hermione said, and the three Apparated to the front of Taliesin West.

"Mummy!" two little voices cried out, and one young teenage girl and a younger boy flew into Hermione's arms. She hugged them fiercely. "Oh, thank Merlin, you're all right!" Tears streamed down her face as she hugged each one, then held them at arm's length to reassure herself they weren't hurt, only to hug them again.

"We're fine, Mum, honestly," Rose said exasperatedly when she had her fill of cuddles.

"Yeah, we are, Mum," echoed her younger brother. "And, oh, Mum, Severus is soooo cool! He told us he'd show us a dragon, a real dragon, in the Himalaya Mountains!"

Hermione frowned and sought Severus's eyes as Lucius sighed dramatically. "I see American speak has infiltrated Hogwarts, how sad." Then he motioned towards the house and said, "Why don't we go inside? It's more comfortable, and we can have drinks."

"Severus?" Hermione asked as she followed Lucius, holding hands with her children.

Severus waited until they were inside the building and the door was closed before he spoke. "I think it might be a good idea to hide Rose and Hugo, and maybe yourself, too, from the claws of the Wilsons, Hermione," he said quietly. "What I saw in Edwina's mind is no better than what the Dark Lord might have planned for someone he didn't like. But let's discuss this later. Why don't we let your children tell of their adventure and have them settled in for the night... and then I think you owe Potter here an explanation, too."

Hermione busied herself with providing drinks for everyone in the kitchen while her children watched with wide eyes the magic of convenience cast about the kitchen. A wine bottle popped open, glasses appeared out of nowhere on the table, and pumpkin juice conjured itself in front of Hugo the moment he said, "Pumpkin juice."

Rose watched with fascination as Lucius simply told what kind of food he wanted, and it popped out of the fridge, prepared itself and flew into the hot oil in the cast iron pan on the Aga. "Stir-fry," Lucius mumbled. "Not brilliant, but it doesn't take long to make."

Severus rolled his eyes at his friend. "Here, let me finish it. I'm better with spices."

Lucius did not argue and sat down opposite Hermione at the kitchen table. He lifted his glass, looked at Rose, Harry, Hugo, and locked eyes with Hermione. "To freedom." Then, he savoured the dark, red liquid.

Severus sat down at the end of the table. "Dinner is ready. Lucius, you'll have to do the honours."

"Oh, we need do nothing. Watch." A cupboard flew open and plates floated towards the table, each plate setting down in front of a person. Then, the cast iron pan floated from the Aga to the centre of the table, and a serving spoon added itself on top of it. "And now, simply help yourselves."

Hermione had not realised how hungry she was. The simple stir-fry tasted heavenly, and everyone dug in as if utterly starved, which was rather likely, she thought, considering it was near midnight in Arizona, and a good seven hours later for her children and Harry.

When the eating slowed down, Lucius said, "So, Rose, Hugo, want to tell us what happened? All we know is that you received owls and the parchments were Portkeys. Illegal ones, obviously."

Rose and Hugo exchanged glances, and Hugo said, "You go."

Rose nodded and started, "It was just before dinner time. We were in the common room, together with lots of others, like normal, when two owls turned up. They looked like school owls. Nita, my friend, opened the window to let them in, and one flew to me and the other to Hugo, who was sitting with his mates at the other end of the room, away from the fireplace. I thought that was weird because when Mum or Dad send us mail, they always send two letters with one owl, not separate ones." She glanced at her mother.

"Yeah, so I untied the parchment, and before I could even feed the owl a treat, I was in that danky dungeon. It was horrible." She wrinkled her nose.

Hugo nodded. "It was. It stank, and the floor was wet, and it was all dark, not enough light to see anything."

"The basement of St Paul's Cathedral," Severus furnished quietly.

Heads turned. "St. Paul's Cathedral? The Royals use that a lot for their ceremonies," Hermione said.

"Yes, well, considering who instigated the kidnapping, I'm not surprised," Severus said dryly. Then he looked at Rose and said, "Continue, Miss Weasley." He grinned wryly and added, "Rose. Old habits die hard..."

Rose beamed at him and did as he'd asked. "Before I even realised what happened, Hugo was there, right next to me. We looked around, and at first, there was nobody there. Then a door opened from somewhere behind us. I'm sure it was a door because suddenly, some light fell in, and when the door closed, it was dark again."

"And then, suddenly, someone switched on a strong searchlight, you know the ones Muggles use in movies. I couldn't see much, but I know there were two guys, one of them had blond hair, short, and looked like an evil Muggle butcher." She looked at her brother for confirmation.

Hugo nodded eagerly. "Oh, yeah. He looked yucky. Like the kind you want to run away from." He shuddered.

"The butcher type spoke to us, the other one was quiet all the time. The butcher sounded like a Londoner, almost Cockney. And he was so horrible. Told us someone would come to kill us in the morning." Rose shuddered. "Then he laughed when Hugo started crying."

Hugo glared at her. "Like you didn't cry."

"Oh, I did, too, but you started first, and I only cried when he told you how Mum is going to follow us soon, and Dad would be spared as long as he provided entertainment." Rose sounded very much matter-of-factly.

Silence suddenly hung heavily in the kitchen upon Rose's words. Severus nodded slowly. "No surprise there." Turning to Lucius, he said, "You know, I think we should copy a few files from Hermione's office computer. I don't think it's safe for her to return just yet."

In her few recent encounters with Severus, Hermione had never witnessed Lucius doubting anything he'd said. But it was as if his authority had risen to new heights. Lucius immediately stood up. "Let's go now, then. Before anyone has the idea to start work early."

"Splendid idea." Severus rose as well. "Ladies, gentlemen, we shall be back shortly." He inclined his head, and the two wizards left.

Hermione looked at her children, Hugo on her left and Rose on her right. They looked more tired than she felt. "Rose, love, Hugo, love, how about going to bed?" she asked softly. "Nothing is going to run away. We'll all be here in the morning, and we'll talk some more. Okay?"

The children nodded tiredly. "Mummy, I don't want to sleep alone," Hugo admitted.

"It's okay, Hugo, you don't have to," Hermione assured him. "You both can sleep in... my bedroom. The bed is bigger than any you've ever seen, and you'll both have plenty of space." She pulled Hugo closer and wrapped her arm around Rose. "Come, I'll show you." Turning to Harry, who sat all forgotten at the table, she mouthed, "Back in a minute."

"Oh. Wow! That is one huge-arse bed," Hugo remarked, proving at least linguistically whose son he was. Hermione let it slide. He was young, he was tired, he'd been through hell, and such language could be forgiven.

"Now, quickly, choose your sides. Tomorrow is another day for talking," Hermione said and ushered her cherished offspring into bed. Neither of them had hit the pillow by the time they'd fallen asleep. She smiled and quietly walked out.

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A/N: For details of the prompt, please see chapter 1.

Grateful thanks go to southernwitch69 for making this more readable. For correct writing, thank her. For mistakes, blame me.

blue\_paris made me a banner. I squeed. Thanks, hon!

# Thirteen

## Chapter 13 of 20

There is interaction, followed by lots of Apparating.

Disclaimer: Ownership hasn't changed; if you recognise it, it belongs to JKR. If you don't, it likely belongs to me. Wild theories of there being an entrance to the Inner Earth in Tibet do exist. Paper wastage was not involved, and lives were not put at risk either. The electrons in the computer continue with their indignation.

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The night turned out to be as long as the day had been. Once the children had fallen asleep, Hermione took time filling Harry in on her and Lucius's findings as well as details of Severus's survival.

"Wow," Harry said. "That is just unbelievable." He shook his head.

Hermione sighed. "Do you remember the funeral? We cried our eyes out, and I was angry at Ron for not showing any emotions."

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Gods, that was sad. I'd just realised he really, *really* had been on our side all the way, and then he fucking died. I'm so glad he didn't!"

"As am I," Hermione said softly.

Harry looked at her. "Um, Hermione, I mean, Draco kind of mentioned in passing that you and Lucius are a deal, but where does Snape come in?"

Hermione snorted. "Good question. Did Draco mention that Lucius has kept in contact with Severus all those years?" She looked at him curiously *No, didn't think so.* "They're best friends, they share a bed whenever the opportunity arises, that's where Severus comes in."

Harry's eyes widened. "Bi? Both of them?"

"Oh, absolutely. Well, I don't know about Severus. He might be gay for all I know. But they're amazing together."

"Erm, I really don't want to know, Hermione."

Hermione slapped his arm. "No, you dolt, I'm not talking about sex! They're amazing in that they finish each other's thoughts and work together like a dream team. What one doesn't pick up, the other does. How do you think Rose and Hugo ended up here safely? That's purely because Lucius and Severus understand each other with very few words, you know?"

Harry nodded slowly. "I think I understand. Draco... The better Ginny and I get to know him, the more we like him..." He looked up suddenly. "Damn! Shouldn't we tell Ron that Rose and Hugo are safe?"

Hermione shook her head slowly. "No, not right now, Harry. Severus hasn't told us all he found out, and I'd rather have my children somewhere absolutely safe before I let Ron know they're with me. It wouldn't do for him to tell *her* just so she can come after them again."

"You think it's Edwina?"

"That's what Severus mentioned. And I'd rather wait until I hear the full story before I let Ron know, especially considering that even you think Ron's turned weird."

"Yeah, he isn't himself these days. He was behaving really weird at Hogwarts, too." Harry frowned. "I mean, he seems to be her poodle. She speaks, he obeys."

Hermione could not suppress a grin. "Yeah. He was a bit, wasn't he?" Then she turned serious again. "It's a shame. She has absolutely no respect for him."

"That's what I figured," Harry agreed.

The door opened and Lucius's and Severus's voices drifted to the kitchen. Harry stood up. "I guess I should make a move and head back."

"Oh, good, you're still here, Potter." Lucius walked into the kitchen, closely followed by Severus. "Draco informed me that Mrs Wilson headed to the City about an hour ago. No surprise there, of course. She probably went to punish the thugs who held Rose and Hugo captive. No need to worry about that; Severus Obliviated the two who were guarding the children."

Harry nodded. "I'm glad Draco put that tracking charm on her."

Lucius continued. "And, oh, if you could possibly spare your Invisibility Cloak for a few hours tomorrow, Draco would appreciate it. He's planning to follow her ladyship, but could do it so much easier with your Cloak."

Harry nodded. "No problem."

Severus pointed to the kitchen table. "Sit down, Potter. You might as well hear my findings."

His expression resigned, Harry sat back down again. Lucius Accioed a new bottle of wine and sat down next to Hermione.

"Edwina is not going to stop. Her plan is to get rid of the children first, then their mother, and eventually Mr Weasley, from what I saw in her mind and the children confirmed. She might live apart from her husband, but there is a very good reason they have not divorced: they work together. They are both in favour of taking over every society on this planet and getting them under their control, using them as robots, as slaves, just as they're doing with Muggles already. Not that it comes as a surprise. We've known about the Wilsons for a long time, and they always marry into the same families. Edwina's ancestors are Wilsons as well as Camerons and Dulleses. The same names you come across when you look at the genealogy of any big fish."

"Fuck," Hermione said. "What are we going to do?" She looked at Lucius, then at Severus.

Severus looked smug. "We're going on holiday." With a more serious expression, he continued. "You are safe in this house, but the moment you step outside, you won't be. I don't know how long Lucius has before he'll be hunted, considering his treatment of Mrs Wilson and her volatile nature. She might just send a Manchurian candidate after him. Or pay a hit man." He shrugged. "That's how the likes of her work."

Hermione snickered and turned to Lucius. "You weren't very nice to her, were you..." Then she turned to Severus. "And where are we going? I bet they can find us pretty much anywhere, don't you think?"

Severus grinned. "Well, Edwina did plan to cast a tracking charm on you, but I doubt she had a chance, given her abrupt departure. But even if she had, she'd not be successful tracking you if you follow my suggestion." He pulled a small electronic gadget out of his robe. "Here. This contains pretty much everything from your computer and a lot of data from Mr Wilson's computer for your perusal. The contents of your computer now look...ah...somewhat innocent."

Hermione took the flash drive from him and gazed at him. "Innocent? What do you mean?" She had a hunch she might not like his answer.

He appeared the slightest bit uncomfortable. "Well, you see... your emails will show mainly conversations about religion with alleged friends and some interaction with members of the Vatican about converting to Catholicism, and the only files on your computer, aside from the obviously work-related ones, which, by the way, will disappear once they're opened and closed again, are related to philosophical ponderings of religion."

Harry and Hermione gaped at him. "Brilliant," Harry whispered. "They'll either think you've gone round the bend or they'll think they've been had. Just brilliant."

"Yes. And they can't quite be sure which one. Well," Severus continued, addressing Hermione, "in any case, your tracks...that ~~is~~obvious tracks...will lead towards the general direction of Italy and dissolve somewhere between Iceland and Ireland. That'll be easy enough...it's all water." He grinned. "And... I won't say more right now because I believe it might be a good idea if Mr Potter here does not know *all* the details. Let me just say... we'll disappear off the face of the earth for a while. Literally." Now he looked like a cat that had just had a bowl of cream.

Harry finished the last of his wine and stood up again. "I really have to go. Ginny must be wondering where I am." Turning to Lucius, he said, "I'll make contact with Draco as soon as it's safe. There are a couple of people in my department I don't trust, so it might take me a couple of hours to disappear without either of them following, but I'll meet with him today."

Then, Harry turned to Severus. "Professor Snape, I don't know how I can express how relieved, how happy I am that you're alive." He looked down as Severus's eyes seemed to pierce him.

"Thank you, Potter. I'm sure we'll meet again. In the meantime, I'd appreciate if you can keep your discovery of my being alive absolutely quiet."

Harry looked horrified. "I can't keep it from Ginny."

"No. That, I understand. Tell her, by all means. Just make sure she does not pass on the knowledge."

Harry nodded, then turned to Hermione, who'd stood up. She walked him to the front door. "Thank you for coming, Harry. And I'm sorry I've been so short in my owls to you," she said and hugged him.

"I understand. Just, you know, don't do it again." He grinned sheepishly. "I miss you, mate."

"I miss you, too," she whispered. "But I'm in good hands here, honestly."

Harry nodded seriously. "Somehow, I can believe that. As long as you're happy, I am, too." One last hug and Harry was gone.

Hermione slowly walked back to the kitchen, suddenly overcome with exhaustion. The nearest chair suddenly seemed miles away, and she was grateful when Severus, who was nearest to her, rose and picked her up with ease. "I think it's bedtime for you, young lady," he said, very much matter-of-factly.

"I don't know where to sleep. I put the children in our bed," Hermione mumbled. She missed his glance at Lucius, she missed Lucius leading the way to a spare bedroom,

and she missed having her shoes and robes taken off. Furthermore, she missed an entire episode of having four hands on her back, neck, legs, shoulders, and arms, gently massaging Gadabout's Amazing Youth's Reviving Massage Potion into her.

All she remembered the following morning...afternoon?...was how cherished she'd felt to be carried to bed.

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Hermione woke up feeling refreshed, more alive than in years. Which in itself was no small feat, as she frequently woke up next to Lucius feeling very much alive. As memories drifted back into her awareness, she jumped out of bed...she was very obviously in Taliesin West; the interior allowed no doubt..., slipped into her bathrobe that was placed on the navy-blue, fabric-covered chair next to the bed, and made her way to the kitchen.

"Mummy, Mummy, we're going to the mountains today!"

She sat down on a chair at the table and mumbled, "Coffee. Seriously strong coffee." Then she turned to her children. "Oh? Are we?"

"Yes! Severus said so! And Lucius agreed it's a good idea! You can't say no! Please, Mummy!" her son pleaded.

Hermione gratefully sipped the coffee from her mug while taking in her children's pleas.

"Oh, Mum, please! It sounds so wonderful!" Rose chimed in. Then she looked pleadingly at Severus. "You promised..."

Severus sighed exasperatedly. "Don't make puppy eyes at me, young Rose. Your mother will tell you they've never worked on me. In fact, I believe you are the first one to do so." Turning to Hermione, he said, "There are several entrances to the inner earth scattered around the world. Now, I doubt Edwina and whomever she works with know I'm alive. However, if her side works hand in hand with Muggle forces, they'll know there's something strange going on at McMurdo Base in Antarctica, seeing as I have liberally... utilised their facilities for many years. Furthermore, they are aware of there being a population down below and entrances at the Poles. So, just to be on the safe side, we'll avoid the entrance at the South Pole."

Lucius entered the kitchen and sat down next to Hermione, giving her a peck on her cheek, which the children, avidly following Severus's words, were too busy to notice.

Severus looked at Lucius. "You already know the plan. I'm just telling Hermione and her children." Then he turned his attention back to Hermione, with occasional glances at Rose and Hugo, while laying out their intended route.

When he'd finished, Hermione looked doubtful. "That's one hell of a trip," she said. "And I'd better Transfigure some clothes to keep us warm. Phoenix doesn't get cold in winter, and I've not had any need to buy any warm clothes." She rose while gulping down the last of her coffee.

"You need some new clothes for Rose and Hugo, as they only have what they're wearing. This is not just a day trip," Lucius offered.

Before Hermione could reply, Severus said, "You cannot go out around here now. I'll go to a Muggle store and obtain some clothes we can Transfigure. We don't need much for the trip. Just enough to get us there. I suggest you all get ready while I go shopping." He placed his now empty cup on the table and stood up.

---

It was evening when the party was finally ready to leave, having received more detailed instructions from Severus and, in the case of Rose, surprisingly patient answers to the many questions she'd had. Three wizards and two witches, two of them excited for the sake of potentially embarking upon the adventure of their lives, the other three relieved at the prospect of safety for themselves in general and for Hermione in particular, prepared to leave life as they knew it behind.

They stood loosely in a circle in front of the house. "Let me put tracking charms on each of you, just in case." Severus cast the charms, interactive between all members of the group, just to be on the safe side. "Good. Now, Lucius will Apparate us to the coast of Northern California. From there, I'll take over. In a few minutes, we'll have travelled a few thousand miles. So," he looked at Rose and Hugo now, "make sure you choose a spot you're comfortable in."

Hugo, who was standing next to his mother, fidgeted. "I want to be next to you, too," he said shyly.

Severus nodded briefly and moved to be next to Hugo, who stood next to his mother.

Rose huffed. "I'm *adult* enough to do this without Mum's help!" She moved from her mother's side to the spot between Severus and Lucius.

Lucius grinned and took Hermione's other hand. "Okay. Let's go."

They arrived to a spectacular sunset over the Pacific Ocean on a deserted beach in Northern California. After spending a few minutes admiring this splendid display of nature's beauty, Severus said, "It's time to move on."

Again, they took each other's hands, and the next stop was a tropical beach. Humid heat hit everyone as they set foot on the sand. The sun was low in the sky, but the beach was not yet deserted.

"Oh, please, let's not spend any time here," Hermione begged.

"Hawaii. No, I think not. Get ready." Severus glanced to ensure they all touched held other's hands and Disapparated.

Another beach, as much humidity, as much heat, despite the sun obviously having set a while ago, this time somewhere in Asia, Hermione figured.

"Philippines," Severus stated for the benefit of Rose and Hugo. Again, only a short stop.

Then, the top of a hill. A cool breeze welcomed the five, caressing skin, waving strands of hair in a welcoming fashion. A new day was dawning, offering mere glimpses of outlines of hills and mountains scattered with trees, stark against the still almost-dark sky. "Please, can we stop and breathe for a minute?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, we should. It is fairly deserted here in this part of China. The next stop will be at considerably higher altitude, so let's rest for a bit here."

They all sat down on the patch of grass they'd Apparated onto and sighed contentedly when Severus produced a tray of fruit and offered it around. Even Rose and Hugo stopped their chatter as a fiery ball rose over a mountain in the distance against an intensely blue sky. But all too soon, it was time to move on yet again. Now dressed in warm clothing and covered in cloaks, the witches and wizards Disapparated once more.

The next stop was on hard ground covered lightly with snow. "Breathe deeply now while you can. Air will be thin for the next couple of stops," Severus advised.

Air was thin indeed. Hermione gasped for it, but found it almost insufficient.

Lucius squeezed her shoulder. "Lean on me."

She did and found comfort. The world righted itself again. Hermione watched her children hanging onto Severus's lips. His voice and mannerism had lost none of their mesmerising character she remembered from her days at school.

"Now we are in the Himalaya Mountains proper. The higher up we go, the thinner the air becomes. And," with a sideways glance at Hermione, "some feel it more than others. Right now, we should be approximately 18,000 feet above sea level, and the next stop, our last one so close to the skies, will be Tibet. From there, we will descend again to enter territory mostly unknown to humankind."

Severus's hand dived into his cloak pocket, and he pulled out a vial. "Here, take this. I have nothing specific for altitude sickness, but this strengthening draught will take the edge off your discomfort," he said quietly as he offered her the vial.

Hermione gulped it down gratefully. "Thanks." Feeling slightly better, she nodded. "I'm ready." She took Hugo's hand and lightly pressed Lucius's, who'd never let go of hers.

They landed in foot-deep snow on the edge of what looked like an ancient village nestled against stark mountains on a plateau. The sun shone brightly, but with no strength...the cold hit them head-on, and everyone hurriedly pulled their cloak hoods over heads and ears.

The wind added to the discomfort everyone was feeling now...except Severus, who looked as calm, as unconcerned, as he had on the beach in California.

Hermione looked around. There were no trees for shelter, only some small bushes, bare of leaves.

"Come. We'll find shelter, and then I will go and find someone to lead the way." He started walking towards the village.

Hermione felt panic well up inside. "You don't know the way from here?" Her voice sounded shrill, even to herself. She bit her lip and stared at the ground, embarrassed that her children held up so much better than their mother.

A strong arm wrapped around her shoulder. "It's not long now, love," Lucius soothed. "We've managed the worst and haven't been stopped by anyone. The rest will be easier."

"I know..." Hermione sighed. *What the hell is wrong with me? I'm behaving worse than the wimps I so despise...*

Severus led them into a barn. "Not exactly luxurious, but it's better than staying out in the cold." He looked at Hermione. "Nobody would blame you for losing it, you know. You've lost, then regained your children, you've travelled thousands of miles in less than twenty-four hours, and you've had to flee from forces you know would kill you if they caught you, Hermione. Hang in there for a couple of hours longer, and you can relax without worries about the safety of your family or yourself." He held her gaze for another moment before turning to the children. "I'll go and find a contact to lead us to the entrance. Look after your mother until I'm back, all right?"

Rose and Hugo met his eyes and nodded in unison.

Severus turned to Lucius. "If one of the small folk shows up, you know what to do." Without waiting for Lucius's answer, he turned and hurried back outside.

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A/N: For details of the prompt, please see chapter 1.

Grateful thanks to HogwartsClassof91 and kittylefish for a super-speedy beta while southernwitch69 was fighting hurricane Gustav.

## Fourteen

*Chapter 14 of 20*

Little people, a dragon, and an entirely unexpected shift in energy.

Disclaimer: It still isn't mine; if you recognise it, it belongs to JKR. If you don't, it might belong to me. There are wild theories about an "Inner Earth." No paper wastage was involved, and dragons were not put at risk either. The electrons continue to be miffed.

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"Small folks?" Hermione laughed nervously. "What haven't you told me, Lucius?"

"Little people. They switch dimensions, love, so we don't generally see them unless they want us to." He pulled her closer and kissed her hair. "Fret not. We'll soon be safe and comfortable."

His voice and tone soothed her once more, but only momentarily. She started when several house-elves popped into the barn. No. Not house-elves. They were smaller, and they wore clothes. Proper clothes.

"What is so important that you felt the need to call upon an army of us?" one small person asked, his voice stern. "The redhead can go where no sun shines for all I'm concerned. He is not worth the skin he wears!"

"Greetings," Lucius said, seemingly unperturbed. "Severus told me you'd likely have that opinion. However, he asked me to convey a message to you."

The little person looked more menacing than Hermione remembered Severus during her Hogwarts years. "Yes? It better be a good one. Sir." The last word was thrown like a bone to a stray dog.

Lucius laughed. "It is not for me to judge. All I ask is that you not kill the messenger."

The little man's voice softened. "No. Not ever."

"Severus asks that you inform the redhead that his children are safe and with their mother."

The little person suddenly grinned. "Oh, yes, we can do that. No conditions?"

"No conditions," Lucius confirmed. "I would, however, ask you to make the acquaintance of said children."

The little man looked up questioningly. "Yes?"

"Rose, Hugo, come forward and meet the spokesman for the little people."

Rose and Hugo got up from their spot in the hay and gingerly walked towards the small man, their hands outstretched. "Hello. Nice to meet you."



The elf-like person took their proffered hands, first Rose's, then Hugo's. "If ever you need one of us, just call on us." He then made a waving gesture with his hand, and he and the other small folks who'd been silent throughout disappeared.

Hermione leant heavily against Lucius. "What was that?"

His deep chuckle soothed her. "There are more beings on this planet than we know. Little people amongst them. Nothing to worry about, though. Weasley will get the message that his precious offspring are safe, and Edwina will be pissed off, no doubt."

"Okay..." A deep breath escaped Hermione. "Will this be over soon?"

Again, his arms tightened around her. "Yes, love. And then we'll spend at least a couple of weeks just relaxing and doing whatever you want to do."

She felt mollified at that.

The barn was suddenly bathed in green. Hermione looked up and her eyes widened. A dragon, its colour the most vibrant grass-green she'd ever seen, its eyes as intensely sky-blue, met her eyes.

"Please, don't worry!" came Severus's voice as he jumped off the back of the dragon and hurried into the barn.

Hugo and Rose shrieked. Hugo uttered, "Bloody hell." His face turned beet-red, then he said, "Sorry. Didn't mean that." He looked at the dragon in awe and nodded. "Yes."

Rose looked at her brother from the side, frowning. "What on earth are you on about, Hugo?" Then her eyes widened, and after a moment of silence, she said, "Oh. I see."

Hermione looked from Hugo and Rose to Severus, her face a question mark.

"It's all right," he mouthed, and she nodded silently. If he found nothing wrong with her children's unexpectedly strange behaviour, then there probably ~~was~~ nothing to worry about.

Then, suddenly, Hermione understood.

*I am an ambassador to the mountains on top of the earth. Karl asked me to meet your group to lead you safely down below. Your children are delightful. Although your he-child needs to curb his language. The concept of hell is entirely surface-earth.*

Hermione swallowed. This was a new form of communication for her. *Oh, Merlin, what do I do now? How do I communicate?*

She heard...no, felt...a low chuckle. *I am, indeed, Merlin, although I have no doubt it is not I you called upon. You communicate simply like you did just now.*

She felt her knees weaken and was grateful for the support Lucius offered. "Oh, Merlin, help me..."

Severus chuckled, not unlike the dragon. "Come. A short ride, and we'll reach the parts no human, Muggle or wizard, can come after us." He led the way to the dragon's...Merlin's...back and motioned for Lucius to climb up first. Then he helped Hermione up behind Lucius. Next came Hugo, right behind his mum, then Rose, and finally, Severus climbed up to form the tail.

Merlin very gently lifted off the ground and slowly gained speed. While he gave off some heat, the wind and cold made the journey very uncomfortable. Hermione's face began to burn from the sheer force of the cold, and it felt worse the higher they went.

Then, Merlin dipped down, his pace slowing drastically. *Watch!*

"They *have* to come through here! It is the only entrance to the inner earth in this area!" one voice said.

"Well, can you see any evidence that humans have been here? Can you hear or see anyone coming?" another argued.

A third one said, "We have people stationed in the vicinity of every entrance known to us; if they don't come through here, they'll turn up at another entrance. Maybe in Kentucky; that's much closer to Arizona!"

The first one snorted derisively. "Yeah, right. I figure that would be the last place they'd try! Far too obvious. They aren't stupid, those people!"

A group of four wizards were stomping about the wilderness, all of them white and the speakers obviously English, judging by their accents.

Another wizard said, "If they'd come through here, we would see foot prints, no doubt. There are at least four of them: the children, the mother and that blond guy."

As Merlin whooshed down to pass mere inches away, Hermione realised he must have cloaked them somehow. The wizards didn't look up until he was close enough to be touched; then, they stared, shocked. She followed Lucius's example and waved at them.

"You are, as usual, late," Severus called out to the party as Merlin slowly passed them. "Feel free to give Edwina our regards!"

Merlin once more soared up and increased speed, leaving four speechless wizards behind.

Just as Hermione thought her face had finally frozen off, and Hugo had trouble staying awake, and Rose doubted she'd ever see another day because it was cold and she was so tired it was painful, the landscape changed from snow to mud to greenery, the temperature changed from unbearably cold to bearable to comfortable, and suddenly, it felt like paradise.

*We have arrived.*

There had been no door, no gate, and yet, the change had happened suddenly. Now they were flying over a green, deciduous forest...Hermione could make out pine trees, oak trees, beech trees, birch trees, and several clearings full of luscious grass...and the temperature was perfect. The burning sensation in her face receded fast, and soon, her clothing felt almost too warm.

Merlin once again descended and then landed softly in a clearing. *You'll feel warm now. Take your winter clothes off. It is not long to go, but you may as well be comfortable.*

They took off again, now back in the clothes they'd worn in Phoenix. *A lifetime ago*, Hermione thought.

After ten minutes, or maybe an hour or two...Hermione had no idea...Merlin landed once more. *Welcome to Shambhala. I will be there for you whenever you call on me. Goodbye for now.*

They climbed off their saviour and were met by Karl. "Welcome!" His smile was radiant and his joy contagious.

"Karl!" Hermione stumbled towards him, and he had to sprint to catch her.

"Hermione! Love, you need rest!" He picked her up effortlessly and greeted the others. "Rose, Hugo, how wonderful to meet you! Welcome to the inner earth!" Then he turned to Lucius. "My friend. I'm so pleased to see you here again." He handed Hermione to him; she was barely conscious.

Then he turned his attention to Severus. "Thank you. This was a close call, and I can imagine nobody else handling the situation as well as you did. Now, what do you want to do, where do you want to go?"

Severus cleared his throat. "I'm not sure Hermione will make it to my home. We're all quite exhausted."

Karl nodded. "Come. I have a house for you to stay in until you've rested." He led the way and within minutes arrived at a house typical of the area. Formed by crystals, it was light and airy, and it offered plenty of space. The beds were as soft as the light filtering through, and the furniture had no sharp edges.

"Are you hungry?"

Two young voices answered with a resounding "Yes," the others remained quiet.

Karl chuckled and disappeared for a moment. He returned with trays of fruit, which were immediately attacked by Rose and Hugo.

"There are a few bedrooms here, with various numbers and sizes of beds. Choose where you want to sleep, and I'll see you tomorrow. If you get hungry, the kitchen is through here," he pointed at a corridor leading off the main room, "and there's plenty of food." Karl nodded at Severus. "If you're not ready to collapse yet, you know where to find us. We'd love to talk to you."

"Tell Lola I'll be over shortly," Severus replied.

Lucius and Severus exchanged glances. Severus nodded imperceptibly, and Lucius carried Hermione to the nearest bedroom where he placed her on the bed and took off her shoes. Then he took off his own shoes and robe and lay down next to her. Hermione did not stir.

---

Severus waited for Hugo and Rose to choose a bedroom, waited until they'd fallen asleep, which predictably didn't take long, and then silently left the house. A saucer-shaped vehicle hovered a short distance from the house and opened its door when he approached. A small ladder descended to the ground, allowing him access. Once he was seated inside, the ladder retreated, the door closed, and a small whirl indicated the vehicle was moving.

A few minutes later, Severus arrived in Agharta near Lola and Karl's home and walked the short distance from the landing spot.

He gratefully took the cup of tea Lola held out for him once he sat down. "Thank you."

"Do tell, Severus. The children are fine, I saw," Karl said.

"I am so glad everything went well! But yes, I do want to hear everything," Lola said.

Severus told Lola and Karl the events from the moment he'd arrived at Taliesin West. Time passed unnoticed as he meticulously recalled every detail.

"Hermione seems to be more severely affected, which is understandable, seeing how it was *her* children who were kidnapped. But I'm sure she'll be perfectly fine once she's had some rest," he finished.

Lola nodded slowly, then grinned. "And Lucius took it all in stride, I take it?"

"Naturally," Severus said wryly. "A Malfoy is never bothered by mundane events such as fleeing half-way round the world." He tried to suppress a yawn. "Good god, woman, do you never sleep?" he asked.

"Oh, I do occasionally." Lola laughed. "But your tale was far too interesting to miss." Then, her expression turned into a wistful smile. "You *do* know why Hermione is particularly exhausted, Severus, don't you?" she asked softly.

He avoided her eyes and nodded slightly. "I have a suspicion."

Lola laughed, but quickly turned serious again. "Don't make it difficult for her, Sev. Never before has the world depended on *you*," she warned.

Just then, the earth seemed to shake.

---

Hermione woke up suddenly. It was still dark outside, although the crystal structure seemed to give off a very faint glow from the previous day's sunshine, and she could make out the shapes of furniture in the bedroom. "Lucius?" His arms were wrapped around her midriff, his leg was draped over hers, and she felt his erection press against her lower back.

"Love? What is it?" he asked sleepily.

"Make love to me..."

He did.

She relished the feel of his tongue on her neck, her shoulders, and eagerly turned onto her back to offer him further access, which he accepted as eagerly. His tongue moved from her shoulders downward, leaving no inch of skin untouched.

She relished the sensation. She relished the feel of his hair between her fingers. Even after a day of travelling half-way around the world, it was as silky, as clean, as smooth as ever. She simply appreciated, ignoring her drive to ponder any potential spells to make his hair so perfect.

His mouth had now reached her core while his hands were trailing after the path his tongue had taken mere seconds ago.

"Oh... Please... Yes. Oh... No! I need you inside. NOW!"

Lucius obliged, only just in time.

Before she even came down from her high, she could feel the shift in energy. Seismic.

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"Oi!" Karl said. "I hope that didn't cause California to finally fall into the ocean!"

"Doofus," Lola said affectionately. "Sex has never caused earthquakes. Not on our side, anyway!" She smiled and turned to Severus. "Go. Now."

Severus shook his head. "No. Now is not the time."

"Severus!"

He shook his head again. "No, Lola. Really." Now he faced her. "Not now," he repeated firmly.

Karl nodded slowly. "I understand."

Severus smirked. "Besides, they've gone back to sleep."

Lola and Karl laughed. "Indeed. You bought yourself a bit of time." Lola got up and approached Severus. "Love, you only do what you want to, okay?" She messed his perfectly parted hair in an affectionate gesture.

Severus shook her off. "Keep your hands off me, woman. Yes, I want to." He stood up and got ready to leave. "Just give me a day or ten, please?"

Karl laughed. Lola grinned. "Sure," she said.

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A/N: For details of the prompt, please see chapter 1.

Good heavens, I didn't credit the betas initially in this chapter! Colour me embarrassed! I... I think it was HogwartsClassof91 and kittylefish who did this one while SW69 was still out of action/internetz. \*blushes with embarrassment\*

## Fifteen

*Chapter 15 of 20*

There are conversations.

Disclaimer: I don't own a castle because I can't afford it, so it's safe to assume that I'm not JKR and therefore don't own the characters. If you recognise it, it belongs to her. However, JKR's universe is on earth. Parts of this tale take place inside the earth. Theories about the earth being hollow exist in abundance. No paper was wasted in the creation of this fic, and dragons continue to live safely inside the earth. The electrons are having serious issues with being worked so hard, though.

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When Hermione woke up again, it was daylight, and a gentle, warm sun bathed the room in an almost smoky light. Lucius's arms slowly untangled themselves from her body, and he stretched. "Morning, love."

"Morning, love." Then Hermione remembered. "What did we do?"

"Oh. We made love." He nodded earnestly. "Yes, is all."

"Yes. Is all." Her echo was barely whispered.

The door opened and Rose appeared. She stopped abruptly, her eyes wide. After a short silence, she said, "Ah, well, I'm glad your taste in men is much better than Dad's taste in women."

Lucius laughed. "I'm so glad you approve, Rose!"

Rose half-heartedly rolled her eyes at him. "I bet you are." Then she looked at Hermione. "Severus is making breakfast. It'll be ready in a few minutes he said." Her message delivered, she turned around and left, leaving the door open.

Lucius grinned as he watched her retreating form. "Teens, eh?"

"Yeah..." Hermione sighed. "Here I was hoping she'd have an easier time than I did... And now it looks like she's facing the same problems, just with a different name."

Lucius pulled her close. "No. She won't. We'll make sure of that."

Hermione snuggled up to him, but then pulled herself out of bed. "I am actually hungry, and breakfast sounds really good." Her stomach growled in agreement.

When the couple entered the kitchen, Hermione stopped in her tracks at the sight in front of her. Hugo expertly flipped what looked like a pancake in the cast iron pan, avidly listening to Severus lecturing on the moral benefits of using unfertilised eggs.

"Morning!" Lucius said brightly, and Hermione followed with a considerably meeker-sounding greeting.

"Mum! Severus told me all about ancient wheat and unfertilised eggs, and using real butter! And he knows how to cook!" Hugo said, his voice enthusiastic.

"Can I have some food, please, Hugo?" Hermione asked, smiling at her son's enthusiasm.

"Absolutely," Hugo answered. "Let me get this right..." He put a pancake on a plate, added some fresh, bite-sized fruit, two eggs, scrambled the way he knew his mum liked, and put it in front of her.

It tasted delicious. The eggs tasted like eggs, real eggs. The fruit tasted like real fruit. And the pancake was simply divine.

"Impressive, Hugo," Hermione said. "You should make breakfast more often!"

Hugo grinned. "Oh, I couldn't have done it without Severus's help. But I had fun doing it! And I'm glad you like it!"

Severus handed a plate to Lucius and sat down himself opposite Hermione and Lucius. "His talent is... acceptable," he said with a sideways look at Hugo, who had sat down himself with a plateful of pancakes and fruit and beamed at his new hero.

They had nearly finished when Karl and Lola arrived. After exchanging greetings, Lola addressed Rose and Hugo. "I was wondering if you'd like to explore Shambhala. We have some nice gardens and an area inhabited by animals you might enjoy." She looked at them questioningly.

"Oh, I would love to!" Hugo said, obviously in awe; whether it was from Lola's incredible presence or the prospect of checking out new plants and seeing animals, Hermione

wasn't certain.

Rose nodded, smiling. "Me, too," she said.

Lola looked at Hermione, who nodded. "Don't mind me," she said and grinned. "I'm sure I'll find ways to spend the day."

"That's what I thought," Lola said softly, and Hermione felt a surge of love well up for the woman she barely knew. It simply felt right to trust her with her children.

Karl walked up to her. "I can, maybe, explain some things to you..."

Hermione nodded. "Yes. I would appreciate that. I think." She met Karl's eyes.

He nodded. "Yes. I think you would."

Hermione followed Rose into the bedroom, but realised she couldn't tell her what to wear; they had very few clothes with them, and half of them way too warm for the temperate climate.

Rose turned to face her mother. "Mum, honestly! I know what to wear, and I'm sure Hugo does, too. It's not as if we have much of a choice right now!" She rolled her eyes, a habit, Hermione noticed with a hint of regret, the girl had picked up from herself.

"I'll sort out some clothing for you today," Hermione promised. "If you want something different looking, I'm sure I can Transfigure it for you."

"It's okay, Mum," Rose said. "I really don't care about it." She giggled. "I'm not a Muggle, you know... I'm not a fashion victim."

Hermione laughed. "No. I didn't perceive you as such, love!" Then, she kissed her children good-bye and returned to the kitchen where Severus, Lucius, and Karl were having an animated conversation about sudden changes, albeit subtle ones.

"We've never received this many messages," Karl said.

"Messages?" Lucius asked.

"Messages," Severus confirmed. "Karl and some others are in contact with a few Muggles up there, who report to him if there are any changes in... Muggles' perception."

"What kind of... perception?" Hermione asked as she sat down next to Lucius.

"Well, they've been behaving like sheep for years, decades even, in general. Now, suddenly, a large number seems to be waking up. They no longer want to... just exist. They want to become active, to stop the outside control." Severus looked at her intently.

"Oh." Hermione was lost for words.

Lucius grinned.

Severus grinned.

"Hermione, you set off earthquakes this morning," Karl said gently.

Hermione blushed.

"I... I felt the shift in energy, but seriously, that can't have been it." She sounded wrong to her own ears, even more so when the three men laughed.

"Don't underestimate your power, Hermione," Severus said.

Karl stood up. "I have some things to take care of. I'll be back later, and we can talk more." He nodded at them and left.

Lucius stood up. "I hate to do this, but, um, Sev, can you get me transport to the Manor? I want to see Draco, and then I need to track Shacklebolt down, preferably with Potter on my side."

Severus nodded. "Give me five minutes." He left.

"Lucius? What's this about?" Hermione asked, feeling panic rising within.

Lucius put a hand on her arm. "Please, love, don't worry. I'll be back in no time, and in the meantime, Severus will look after you. And besides, this place is safer than you can imagine anywhere on earth: You can go out and about, and if you get lost, simply find a person and tell them you're Karl and Lola's guest, and they'll redirect you back here. Really, there's nothing to worry about."

It wasn't what she wanted to hear, but it made do. For now. "All right."

Severus returned. "Merlin is waiting for you outside the house. Look out for crop circles. A lot have popped up this morning, which is highly unusual for this time of year."

"When will you be back?" Hermione asked.

Within twenty-four hours, I would think," Lucius answered as he wrapped his arms around her to say good-bye. "If I take longer, I will send word."

Then, Hermione found herself alone with Severus.

They sat down opposite each other at the kitchen table.

Still not one for small talk, he asked, "Can you think of anything about Edwina that you actually like?"

Hermione met his eyes, startled. "Yes," she said slowly, "I think I can... I'll be forever grateful to her that she took Ron from me. I knew I wasn't happy, but I didn't know just how unhappy I had been for years in my marriage. Had she not turned up when she did, I'd never have met Lucius, and I would have missed out on a great deal of happiness." She stared at the floor now, her fingers wrapping each other so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

He put a hand on her arm. "I understand."

She looked at him. "Do you?"

"I think I do. I lost Lily to James and found Lucius. Then I lost my life as I knew it and found Lola and Karl." He never broke eye contact.

She did and returned to studying the floor. "How do you cope?" she whispered eventually, still not ready to meet his eyes yet again.

He laughed. A genuine, sarcasm- and smirk-free laugh. "Every time one door closed, another, better one, would open for me. How can I not cope?" His face displayed a smile. A happy one, Hermione noticed, startled. "I've been happy with my life for nearly twenty years, Hermione. It's easy to *cope*."

Now she met his eyes. "Yeah. Who would've thought... Severus Snape, who died during the last few hours of Voldemort's reign, is living a happy life in a place that doesn't officially exist."

He grinned a far too boyish grin. "Exactly. And who would believe it if you told them..."

She grinned too. "Exactly. Who would..."

---

"Merlin! I thank you for agreeing to take me to England and back," Lucius greeted the dragon as he climbed on his back.

*My pleasure, Lucius Malfoy. Watch out for crop circles; I'm sure Lola and Karl will appreciate a first-hand report. I will descend once we reach the areas they're displayed if you can't see them from high above,* Merlin informed him and took off gently.

In no time, they reached an opening to the surface...Lucius had no idea which country...and then rose. The temperature dropped rapidly, and Lucius was grateful he'd put on his warm clothes from the day before. The cold still bit him, though; his head felt like its hair had been severed from it, and his lips were no doubt ice-blue.

Lucius felt immense relief when Merlin descended to a much lower altitude. *We are now over England. Look out for crop circles.*

It took mere minutes before Merlin slowed down, and Lucius saw one. A wheat field in an otherwise barren countryside with most fields ready for their winter sleep, displayed a spectacular tetrahedron. It looked three-dimensional from above rather than the typical two-dimensional star shape, Lucius noticed with surprise.

He counted more than two hundred crop circles between the first and Malfoy Manor, all of them identically shaped.

When Merlin gently landed in the massive gardens of the manor, Lucius thanked him.

*Simply call on me in the same way we communicate now,* Merlin suggested. *I will be around, but it is safer to cloak myself.*

Lucius knocked on the massive door of his old home rather than entering without warning, giving Draco the chance to get himself decent.

He needn't have worried; Draco opened, impeccably dressed, a younger image of Lucius himself except for his shorter hair. "Father." His son embraced him.

"Son. It is good to see you. How is it going?"

Draco nodded as he motioned Lucius inside. "It's going."

"And how is your... esteemed wife?" Lucius asked. He'd never particularly liked Pansy and had had a suspicion that his son wasn't as happy in his marriage as he'd liked to be, but it was Draco's life, not his own.

"My... esteemed wife has left," Draco informed him with a sneer.

Lucius's eyebrow almost hit his hairline. That was unexpected. "Oh?"

They had reached the living room where Lucius sat down on the sofa and Draco opposite in a wide, comfortable chair. Draco smirked. "No, I'm not sorry she left, and I don't miss her either. In fact, if I'd known how much better life is without her, I might have cast a discreet *Avada Kedavra* on her years ago." He looked at his father challengingly, as if to say, "I dare you to disagree."

Lucius smirked. "And what, my darling son, brought that about?"

Draco grinned and shrugged. "Well," he drawled, "she couldn't cope with my admission to having a crush on the Potters." He called a house-elf and ordered refreshments.

Lucius laughed. "Who would've thought, eh? A Malfoy with a crush on a Potter and a former Weasley... That's about the same sort of drastic change as I with Hermione."

Draco looked at him. "You're in love with her? What about Severus?"

Lucius shrugged. "Why not both? I know Severus doesn't mind, and I think Hermione might come around to the idea as we speak." He smirked.

"Surely, Father, you've not come here for a round of small talk, have you?" Draco asked.

"No, but I certainly found our *small talk* highly informative," Lucius said. Then he added thoughtfully, "I do hope you'll pursue the Potters, son. It would help with regaining control of our world."

"Well... if you put it like that!" his son drawled, grinning.

"Talking of Potter," Lucius started, "I need to speak to him. And then convince him to accompany me to Shacklebolt."

Draco looked at him questioningly. When his father did not elaborate, he sighed. "Keep quiet, all right? I'll Floo him."

---

Karl chose that moment to enter the kitchen. "I'm glad you're still here. Would you like to go over to our place, and we can show Hermione what you extracted from Wilson's computer so far?"

Hermione looked at Severus. "You have information?" Then she remembered the flash drive Severus had given her back in Taliesin West. "Oh... The drive is in my cloak. I hope." She rushed out to the bedroom.

When Hermione returned with it, the men stood up, and Karl said, "Let's go, then."

They headed out, and the same saucer-shaped vehicle Severus had used the previous night was hovering near the door. Hermione's eyes widened. "A... a flying saucer! That's what Muggles call them..."

Karl chuckled. "Actually, most Muggles call them UFOs. And yes, they're all ours. Sometimes, we make them visible just to cause some interest in things unseen up there."

Severus smirked. "Karl's idea of mischief."

Hermione enjoyed this form of travel. It took barely longer than a Portkey or Apparation, was far cleaner than Floo, had no effects on the stomach, and was more relaxing than Apparating even short distances. Maybe it was the landscape that induced such relaxation, Hermione thought as she drank it in.

All buildings were constructed from crystal, some of quartz, others from rose quartz, a few from smoky quartz. There were no skyscrapers, and not a single house showed any obvious edges; every corner was rounded, and some buildings were dome-shaped. The vegetation was lush everywhere, the intense green of leaves, much larger than any leaves Hermione had ever seen, in beautiful contrast with the vibrant hues of flowers seemingly splattered randomly and yet obviously placed for visual perfection.

When the vehicle landed, Hermione was unable to suppress a sigh. "It's so beautiful here."

"Like it? I'm glad," Karl said and smiled. He pointed at a pretty house built entirely of rose quartz. "Welcome to our humble abode." Then, he led the way to the kitchen and motioned for Hermione and Severus to sit down at the large, round, oak table. He took out three glasses, poured liquid from a large jar, and brought them to the table. Then, he sat down himself.

"How do you like it so far, Hermione?" he asked.

"I like it," Hermione said. "I'm feeling confused, as everything seems very different here, and, well, yes, I like it." She felt lost for words; too much had been happening in the last couple of days, and she was not quite ready to sort out her emotions. Yet.

"It's all right," Severus said. "I'd get worried if you didn't feel confused in any way, you know..." He grinned that boyish grin again.

Karl chuckled. "Indeed."

Hermione looked at the two men. "So... what's next on the agenda?"

"Karl, bring the computer, please, so we can show Hermione the information I found on Wilson's computer," Severus said.

Karl left to bring a laptop, and Severus addressed Hermione. "You might like this." He took the laptop, switched it on, and inserted the flash drive.

Hermione's eyes widened when she looked at the file names. "Goodness, gracious, me." 'Granger', 'Weasley', 'Voldemort', 'Potter', 'Shacklebolt', 'Weasley.Children', 'Plan1', 'Plan2', 'Plan3' flashed before her eyes.

Severus put his hand on her arm. "Please, don't worry. There isn't a lot you don't know already, at least the gist of it. Their 'Plan1' has failed already; it was the kidnapping of Rose and Hugo, followed by the kidnapping of you, and eventually Mr Weasley. 'Plan2' is failing as we speak: those crop circles I asked Lucius to look out for...they're essentially a mirror of the energy grid surrounding the planet. Every time some major change happens in terms of thought, perception, thought patterns, you name it, crop circles appear. Your magick early this morning accelerated that change on a global scale. And the fact that all the crop circles showed the same shape...a tetrahedron... is absolute proof of what you achieved, albeit not quite consciously." He grinned. "Their 'Plan2' of wanting to incarcerate a handful of wizards and witches on made-up charges was thwarted entirely. And besides, they really can't come after you."

Hermione rested her heavy head on her arms. "I don't think I want to know 'Plan3'. Honestly." Hiding in bed sounded really attractive.

Severus gently but firmly cupped her chin to lift her head. "That's good. I'd rather you wouldn't. Your energy is incredible, Hermione. Simply keep following your gut feeling, and 'Plan3' will be sabotaged as well." She was unable to avoid his eyes. She found peace.

He moved one hand to her back and pulled her closer. "It'll be all fine, love..."

She revelled in the feel of comfort. Pure comfort. Then, reality came back. "Where are my children?"

Severus had the audacity to chuckle. "They're currently saying hello to lions and tigers and mice and eagles. Want to go there?"

She looked at him, horrified. "What???"

He chuckled again. "Life is very different down here. Come." He pulled her up and, ignoring Karl entirely, led her outside and around the building, down a weathered set of stone stairs. "There you go," he said, pointing at a few children a short distance away.

Hermione did a double take. She recognised Rose and Hugo and noticed that the other children were considerably taller than her offspring. They appeared to be in an animated conversation with a lion. A male lion. And a small animal beside it. A mouse? A rat? Hermione couldn't tell and rushed forward.

A white tiger stopped her physically by jumping right in front of her. "Leave the children. They are in no danger."

"What?" She looked around in a panic. "Severus?"

Severus shook his head slightly. "There are no predators here. Leave your earthly beliefs behind, please." He'd come up to her now and put his arm around her. "See this boy on the far right? He's only joined recently. He's from Philadelphia. Lost his parents a year ago because they didn't follow the party line. Lola personally brought him here when *they* were about to use him as a guinea pig for new drugs. That's how sad a state the Muggles are in, Hermione. Do you want that to happen to our world?"

Hermione shuddered. "Gods, no," she whispered.

"Then, for crying out loud, woman, utilise the knowledge you carry inside, and stop fighting yourself!" He sounded angry now, and Hermione retreated quickly a few steps away. The lack of his touch made her feel empty.

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Thanks bunches, southernwitch69, for the beta!

A/N: For details of the prompt, please see chapter 1.

## Sixteen

*Chapter 16 of 20*

There are some possibly interesting developments.

Disclaimer: I still don't own it, no matter how hard I try!*Imperio*. By now no doubt you know there are theories about an inner earth or hollow planet. Paper waste is still not an issue, and the electrons are seriously indignant, so there.

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"Oh, hi, Draco! You want Harry? Hang on!" Ginny Potter disappeared from Lucius's view, then Harry Potter appeared.

"Draco. Hi."

"Hi. Got a moment?" Draco asked.

"For you? Anytime," Potter answered, grinning.

"Great! Can we get together for dinner? You, Gin, and I? Oh, never mind. Scrap that. Let me get my priorities right... My father wants you to accompany him to the Minister. When can you do that?" Draco asked.

Potter's face fell. "You prioritise your father's wants before your own? I'm disappointed, Malfoy!"

Draco smirked. "Well, no, not really. I'm just keeping up appearances. Father is in the room and can hear every word."

"Oh. Okay. Well, in that case... If I agree to meet him at three o'clock, will you meet us for dinner?"

A sigh escaped Lucius; he couldn't help it. "Yes, Potter, he will. My word. Just get me to Kingsley in your presence!"

Harry grinned. "All right. Meet me at the phone booth on Charing Cross Road at three then."

"Father?"

"Yes, Draco, no doubt I am your father."

"Yes, and all I have to do to confirm that is look in a mirror, I know. Now, seriously, what's going on?"

Lucius regarded his son. He had grown up a lot, no doubt. Lucius decided to take the risk of telling him his own thoughts and hopes. Even if Draco did not agree with him, at least Lucius could be certain that he wouldn't betray him in any way.

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Severus walked away from her, and Hermione sat down on the ground. *What is going on...* She gloomily stared at the scenery without seeing. *I know I love Lucius. I have no doubt about that. So why...?*

Her reverie was interrupted by Lola's voice. "Severus! Have you forgotten *your* early days here? I think you have. Go. Enjoy the gardens. I'll speak to her." Her voice was gentle yet her tone clearly admonishing.

Hermione looked up as Lola approached. The woman sat down next to her. "Please, dear, don't judge him too harshly. He tends to fall back to his... less joyful ways when he has a lot of contact with people from up above," Lola explained.

Hermione shook her head. "I'm not judging him. I'm just..." She buried her head on her knees and hugged herself tightly. "I don't understand..."

Lola put an arm around her and lightly pressed her shoulder. "There is nothing wrong with liking two men at the same time, you know... It is not unknown here and from my understanding is not that uncommon in the wizarding world either. With Muggles, of course, it's a different situation. They are so far removed from anything natural..." She sighed heavily. "But that's exactly why we are working towards freedom on the entire planet. And... you know, doing the magick with two rather than one other will prove more effective."

Hermione's mind was reeling. Her head shot up and she met Lola's eyes. "Are you saying it's all right for me to have those feelings for... him, even though ~~we~~ *know* I'm in love with Lucius?" she asked, her voice incredulous.

"Go and look for the answer inside yourself, Hermione. I do know life up above is very much subjected to the suppression of intuition, which is one form of keeping control of people. But it is not so down here," Lola said, her tone gently washing over the witch. "Learn to listen to that voice inside."

Hermione's eyes now sought the form of the dark man. He'd joined the young people and looked perfectly natural. "What an amazing change he must have gone through," she whispered.

Lola laughed. "Yes. I remember the early days when he lived here. He was perfectly miserable at first, then fought to maintain the misery because he didn't know there was life beyond it...a better life...and eventually, he gave in to the joy that prevails everywhere down here. It took him a while, though."

---

Just before three, Lucius Disappeared from the manor and reappeared in a narrow alleyway near the Ministry. He walked around the corner to the phone booth. Potter was already there.

"Mr Malfoy," the younger man greeted politely.

Lucius smirked. "Potter. Why don't we drop the formalities? After all, your best friend shares my bed, and my son is about to seduce *you* Harry."

Potter's mouth dropped open. Then he visibly swallowed. "What?"

Lucius motioned for him to enter the booth. "You heard my words. Let me assure you, Potter, a relationship between three adults can be far more rewarding than one between two. Witches, especially strong ones, tend to benefit as much as we do, for two wizards provide more balance."

Potter glanced at him from the side. "I'm not going to discuss my sex life with *you* Lucius."

"Oh, that's a relief. Saves me hexing your mouth closed," Lucius said, smirking again. "Now, does Kingsley know I'm here?"

"I only told him I needed to see him urgently."

The Minister was in a state of upset. Across his desk were several newspapers, both local and national, and he gasped as he read one headline after another. "Merlin, what is going on? The Muggle world seems to rebel everywhere suddenly. This started only last night when about ninety percent of police officers and firemen resigned their jobs! This morning, teachers did the same after facing empty classrooms all over the place! Look at this!" He turned a newspaper around for Harry to read and continued to lament. "I've received no fewer than eleven memos from the Muggle Prime Minister and have no idea what to tell him!"

Lucius looked over the younger man's shoulder. Unable to suppress a grin, he said, "Finally! The Muggles are waking up."

"Lucius!"

"Kingsley."

Kingsley looked questioningly at his favourite Auror. "You could have told me you'd bring Lucius along, Harry."

"Sorry, Kingsley," Harry muttered and looked carefully around. "Can we talk freely here?"

"Yes. I set additional wards and check them daily. *What* is going on these days? I've noticed some time ago that you and Ron don't seem to be on such friendly terms

anymore. And I can't imagine it's because he and Hermione split up."

"No. It has nothing to do with that," Harry agreed.

"I believe it has everything to do with what's going on in terms of control issues, no?" Lucius asked, his voice casual, while carefully observing the Minister.

Kingsley sighed. "I used to trust both you and Ron unconditionally. I don't know what caused me to stop trusting him blindly, but something leads me to believe he is no longer worthy of that."

Harry nodded slowly. "I agree with you."

"Say, Kingsley, would you *now* consider putting a tracking charm on Mrs Wilson?" Lucius felt no need to mention that his son had already done that.

Kingsley nodded curtly. "Yes. I admit fault here. At the time I thought you were paranoid. Only to find that I was being ignorant for the longest time."

The afternoon of exchanging information and viewpoints proved to be revealing, even more so at the end.

Both Harry and Lucius stood up to part with the Minister when a commotion and a loud voice caught everyone's attention.

"What the hell?" Kingsley muttered.

"No matter *who* you are or how *important* it is, you cannot just walk into Minister Shacklebolt's office!" The door opened and revealed Edwina Wilson and Kingsley's assistant.

"I'm so sorry, Minister. She simply ignored me!" the girl apologised.

Wilson glared at her. "Like I have to listen to you, idiot girl," she hissed and turned around to face the Minister. "Shacklebolt. I want that..." She caught sight of Lucius. "Mr Malfoy. What are you doing here?"

"Having tea," Lucius said smoothly. Then he smirked. "How is life treating you, or shouldn't I ask, Mrs Wilson? Did you come here to ask the Minister for assistance with improving the quality of your life?" His tone was now perfectly conversational.

She flinched at Lucius's words and abruptly turned her attention to the Minister.

He held up his hand. "We do observe common courtesies here, Mrs Wilson. Surely, you are aware of that? Calling my assistant an idiot girl is not acceptable."

"Whatever!"

Her accent was very *American*, her tone petulant, and Lucius wrinkled his nose *I bet Hermione would punch her right about now...*

"You need to do something about *your* head of MLE! She is actively sabotaging our efforts to improve the safety of the wizarding world! You would do well to replace her, Shacklebolt!"

Kingsley ignored Lucius and Harry, who stood there avidly following Edwina's words.

"You want me to replace *your* replacement why? What sabotage? I'm not aware of any. Although *I am* aware that she hasn't been to work for the past couple of days. Which I find understandable. Her children were kidnapped out of Hogwarts with an illegal Portkey! So she took them somewhere safe as soon as they were rescued. As you know, we are still investigating the case. Hermione has *never* been known to skive off work in all the twenty-two years she's worked for me. I certainly see absolutely no reason to replace her because she's spending time with her children unexpectedly. We do make such allowances for mothers, you know?"

"It has nothing to do with *that*, and I bet you know it, Minister," Edwina hissed. "The witch has been actively sabotaging our efforts for security."

"I see," Lucius said. "And you took into your own hands to spy on her, did you?"

"I did no such thing!" Edwina shouted. "And besides, that's none of *your* business!"

"I beg to differ," Lucius said. "If my partner's life is jeopardised, then it does become my business."

"Making sure she does her job properly does not constitute jeopardising her life, Malfoy," Edwina spat. "Finding that she does not, however, does justify firing her."

"Mrs Wilson," Kingsley started, and she glared at him venomously. "I do not recall granting permission to investigate one of my most trusted workers. Hermione is as much a war hero as Mr Potter and Mr Weasley. I've known all three since they were in their teens and have worked closely with them for more than twenty years. Forgive me if I cannot simply take your word for her sudden inefficiency, let alone take seriously your claim of her sabotaging Magical Law Enforcement." The look on his face was challenging.

"If I say she has to go, then you better take my word for it. And if I were you, I'd tread very carefully. It would be... a pity if the Minister of Magic met an early demise, would it not?"

A letter whooshed through the fireplace into Edwina's hand, interrupting her blatant threats. She opened it impatiently, her expression still one of smugness, and started to read. Her face turned white.

"Oh, Merlin. The Muggles are rebelling. I need to be with my husband. He will be helpless without my magic if the electromagnetic grid is damaged." She missed the looks between the three wizards, Lucius's encouraging nod, and Kingsley's imperceptible nod at Harry.

Harry cast a silent *Accio* and started reading the letter while Lucius twirled his wand between his fingers.

"Give that letter back, Potter!" Edwina cried and reached for her wand.

Instantly, Lucius's wand was on her throat. "One move, Wilson, and I will give you the treatment you had planned for Rose and Hugo Weasley." His voice left no doubt how deadly serious he was.

Harry silently handed the letter to Kingsley, then moved towards the witch, his wand drawn. Ropes flew out of it, forcing her onto the chair she stood in front of and binding her tightly to its frame.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Edwina shouted.

"If you don't shut your mouth, I will shut it for you," Harry said, any attempt at politeness vanished. "You are under arrest for suspicion of treason, for attempted murder, and for attempted genocide on humanity, Muggle and magical. You have the right to remain silent." He paused shortly, then continued. "Oh, and I accuse you of mind-fucking my best friend. I suppose that's a valid charge, too." The Auror met her eyes, which wore an expression of utter horror.



"Did you know she referred to him as a retard shag buddy?" Lucius threw in conversationally. "I could almost feel sorry for him."

Harry smirked while his eyes remained on the bound witch. "Oh, that's what your comment the other day was about. Yeah, poor Ron." Then his eyes hardened. "Wilson, I'm going to have the Minister authorise the use of Veritaserum on you, and then we'll have a nice, long talk. I'll make sure Ron will be here, too, and I promise you it won't be for moral support."

Edwina remained silent, her mouth now tightly closed.

Lucius addressed Kingsley. "I take it you don't need me here now. I'd like to return to Hermione; I promised her I wouldn't be gone for long."

Kingsley nodded. "By any means, Lucius. We may need you for Wilson's trial, though."

"No problem. Draco *always* knows how to find me." Then Lucius turned to Harry. "Quick word, if you please, Potter. Outside ~~her~~ hearing range."

Harry nodded and motioned for Kingsley to keep an eye on the bound witch.

"Keep your voices down. I doubt the corridor is safe," Kingsley said and shot an angry look at Edwina.

The two wizards stepped outside, and Lucius closed the door behind them. "Draco will explain in detail how you can yet again play the part in the save-the-world game." He smirked at the younger wizard and made his way back to the road from where he Apparated to the manor.

After another hour of briefing Draco, the elder wizard mounted the dragon to return to Shambhala.

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Hermione slowly got up from the ground and approached her children, who looked very much at home amidst exotic beasts, several tall young people, and Severus. She smiled at the sight of their evident happiness.

Severus met her eyes. "I... I'm sorry for taking out my frustration on you earlier," he said quietly. "I've learned much down here, but patience doesn't seem to be included in the curriculum."

Hermione laughed, relieved he was no longer angry. "Don't be sorry. I guess I haven't been in the best state with all that's happened."

"That's not surprising. I can't even begin to imagine what you've been through," he said. "I am glad your children are safe."

"So am I," Hermione said. "I don't want to think how it could have turned out, had you not been there! I don't think I'll ever be able to repay you..."

"It's never about that, Hermione. One thing I learned here is that sleep comes easier when you do what's right. And maybe stop others from doing what's wrong." He shrugged. "That's my Slytherin upbringing gone down the drain." He pointed at a tall man a distance away. "There is Karl. He'll tell us food is ready."

Hermione suddenly realised she hadn't eaten for a while, and the audible grumbling of her stomach confirmed it. She blushed.

Severus laughed. "Good timing, then." He lightly touched her arm as they turned in unison to meet Karl.

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Most grateful thanks to southernwitch69 for the beta. Without her, this would be not quite legible. Or readable. Or comprehensible. Or understandable. You get the drift... Mistakes are mine, for I do not share.

A/N: For details of the prompt, please see chapter 1.

## Seventeen

*Chapter 17 of 20*

Hermione is having an interesting time.

Disclaimer: I still haven't managed to snatch the ownership. If by now you don't know about wild theories about life inside the earth, then you appear to live by the motto *Ignorance is bliss*. Paper has rarely been wasted in the writing of this fic, but the electrons are likely the next species to rebel.

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Hermione had no idea what exactly the meal had comprised, but it had tasted wonderful, and judging by her children's empty plates, they had equally enjoyed it.

"Would you like to look at the files this afternoon and see if we can hack into one of the Wilson computers?" Severus, sitting between her and Hugo, asked her quietly.

Hermione met his eyes. "I'd love to, but what about Rose and Hugo? I can't leave them behind just like that."

He smirked and then rolled his eyes in an exasperated manner. "They'll be fine here. This place is free of predators, and everyone will look out for them. Besides, if they want, they can come with us. My house is big enough and has plenty of books to keep them entertained. If they like reading, that is."

Hermione snorted. Both Rose and Hugo had taught themselves to read long before even a Muggle school would have accepted them, and both were avid readers. "They'll read pretty much anything they conceive as remotely interesting."

Severus smirked again. "Like mother like daughter like son, eh?" He turned to Hugo. "What would you like to do?"

The boy did not have to think. "Go back to the gardens and talk to the animals."

Rose, sitting between Lola and Karl, nodded enthusiastically. "Oh, I'd love that!"

Lola smiled. "That's sorted, then." Addressing Hermione, she said, "Are you fine with that? I'll be happy to show them around the potion gardens later and then bring them over to Sev's place." She turned to Severus. "You wish to go to your home?"

Severus nodded. "I think it might be a good idea. I want to see if we can access some of the Wilson computers now that we have all the information together." He smirked.

Lola nodded. "Good idea." She smiled at Hermione. "I'll bring your belongings over later with Rose and Hugo."

"Thank you. I appreciate it," Hermione said. Slowly, she was feeling more herself again. Thinking about the future did not bear any attempt yet; she'd take one day at a time. Right now, the prospect of talking shop with Severus in terms of disposing of evil was attractive.

Severus led Hermione to the nearby saucer-shaped craft. "One day, we'll walk, but today I'd rather try and get some information about the Wilsons."

Hermione nodded her agreement and climbed up the ladder. "How do these things work? Surely not on petrol."

"No, of course not. Any use involving combustion is considered destructive...negative...so it's not an option. The vehicles here are constructed with the principle of anti-gravity in mind." He smirked. "That's why there are no corners anywhere. People look at nature and simply copy her, seeing how well it works. These discs can easily cover a distance of thousands of miles in an hour."

He looked at her and grinned. "And it's ever so convenient that the discs can be cloaked. That way, we can travel around up there," he pointed upward with this hand, "without ever getting caught."

The saucer landed softly in the clearing of a forest. Hermione looked around curiously. The atmosphere felt slightly different here...she was unable to figure out what it was...and she wondered why they'd landed...there was no building in sight. "Where do you live?" she asked.

Severus smirked again. "Come." He led the way through the clearing into the forest. A short walk later, they reached the entrance to what looked like a cave.

"We are beneath the South Pole here. And Muggles who enter the inner earth through here must agree that they never return to the surface. This cave, which is really a corridor between here and the Pole entrance, slows the journey between the surface and the inner earth. If anyone changes their mind during the thirty-minute-long walk, they can still return."

"Are there many Muggles entering through here?" Hermione could not help her curiosity. In all her life, she'd never heard of the earth being hollow; she could not imagine many Muggles...or any at all, really...learning about that fact either.

"Barely more than a handful since I've lived here," Severus said. "I'm sure you can imagine one must be rather desperate to be willing to leave everything behind and enter an unknown territory *and* an unknown future."

They hadn't walked for long in the cave when Severus's home appeared to the side. The cave with its sandy, moist walls had gradually widened and, after a brief near-darkness, grew lighter again. The quartz structure softly reflected the sunlight and looked inviting.

The house didn't look very large from the cave's entrance, and Hermione was surprised how spacious it was inside. The computer room offered no natural lighting aside from the quartz reflecting the daylight. Two walls were completely dark, obviously built against the sandstone of the cave, and the ceiling seemed to be partially constructed against the cave as well, as parts of it were darker than the rest. Severus moved his wand, and the entire room was bathed in soft light, giving it a feel of cosiness rather than the starkness offices normally emitted.

Severus switched the computer on, then turned and summoned a chair next to his, and motioned for Hermione to sit down. "Let's see what we can find..."

She was surprised when, after a few minutes, Severus took his wand and waved it at the computer. "I thought it's impossible to use magic with computers," she said.

He chuckled. "How do you think I prevented anyone from accessing your computer in Phoenix? There is a lot I can do with programming, but anyone with that knowledge could reverse it. Last summer when Lucius and I visited your office while you were in London, I added a spell to it so only you and I could use your computer. Only when we manipulated the contents of it the other day did I cancel the spell. That's why Edwina had trouble getting into it. Even if she did know the password. And of course now anyone with that knowledge can access it, but they won't find anything of use."

"Oh..." Hermione was lost for words.

By the end of the afternoon, Hermione realised she'd learned more in a few hours about computing from Severus than she'd learned in two years at work. Severus had successfully hacked into Rolf Wilson's computer and was now equipped with plenty of damaging evidence of how Muggle governments had hoodwinked their peoples throughout the world for many centuries by simply withholding basic knowledge, which was once known to everyone, but became arcane with active suppression and by manipulating what came to be known as religion. Furthermore, he'd gifted the Wilson computer with a variety of viruses that would make it impossible for Mr Wilson to retrieve any data whatsoever.

"I don't know why, but I'm positively feeling accomplished," Hermione stated, then added hastily, "I mean, I've learned a lot about programming this afternoon, but you're the one who did all the work."

"Oh, I love doing that kind of thing. I got a kick out of hacking into the McMurdo Base computer. It cost me a fortune, and I froze my arse off because I had to be on the surface to do that, but it was worth it. Of course, once I had the connection to the internet via their satellite going, I was able to use it down here. But, gods, it was freezing, and no matter which warming charm I applied, it wasn't enough. No wonder. Even in summer here, the high is about minus ten at best..."

Turquoise hues permeating the air announced Lola's arrival. As Severus went to open the door, Hermione was marvelling at the differences between the world she knew and the world she was now getting to know. *How can I see someone's arrival just by their aura...*

"Lola. Come in," Severus said and held the door open for her.

She entered and enquired, "So, Sev, are you done with business?" She grinned at Hermione.

"We are, yes," he confirmed. "I take it you came here to insist I indulge in pleasurable activities now?" His sneer held no bite.

"Of course. I do know you, you know! Once you're engaged with something, you entirely forget about pleasure."

"Um, Lola?" Hermione started.

Lola smiled. "They are in the auditorium enjoying themselves already. You will see them shortly."

*Can she read my mind?* Hermione wondered.

Severus sighed exaggeratedly. "That involves dancing." Turning to Hermione, he said, "Allow me," and transfigured her trainers into elegant pumps. Then he looked her up and down. "Did you, by any chance, bring... *that* dress?"

Hermione felt blood rise to her head. She hadn't thought she'd need it, but couldn't resist packing it just to maintain the memory of that weekend in Buenos Aires. "I did, yes."

"Oh, good. I guess I better change as well." Then, Severus turned to Lola. "Shan't be long, dear."

A few minutes later, Lola cast an appraising look at Hermione. "You look beautiful."

"She does." Severus's glance was bordering on predatory, and Lola's smile turned into a wide grin as they exited the house.

The craft took them into Agharta proper and landed in front of a large dome-shaped structure of clear crystal with many points left intact, bathing it in an air of majesty.

Hermione's eyes widened as she entered the auditorium. The place was even larger than it had appeared from outside, and the atmosphere was one Hermione had never before in her life experienced.

Joy...pure, unadulterated joy... seemed to emanate out of every being's pores. There was the sound of people talking, and music drifted from further inside. Many were standing together in small groups...Hermione noticed it was often two males and one female...and some appeared to communicate soundlessly.

Severus took her hand and squeezed it gently. "Overwhelmed?" He smiled when she nodded. "I remember when Karl brought me here the first time. I felt... I don't know how I felt to be honest. I had only just realised there might be more to life than brooding, and this here..." he waved his hand toward the crowd "...confirmed it with absolute clarity that joy can be experienced..."

Hermione nodded again, too lost for words. She watched silently as Lola touched his arm. "Come. Dancing will help Hermione to adjust."

Her hand still in Severus's, she followed the tall woman towards the centre and listened to Lola's melodic voice explaining the particularly happy atmosphere.

"Everyone is excited about the drastic change up above. News of people waking up and disobeying their masters have been coming in thick and fast all day. We have never felt this hopeful about improvements..." Lola was interrupted by a woman stepping into her path, who was considerably shorter than any others Hermione had seen since her arrival. "Hello, Reia!"

"Ah, just the person I was hoping to meet," Severus said. He took a flash drive out of his pocket and handed it to her. "You could utilise this information for flyers if you like. Then we can distribute them all over the planet."

"Severus! Wonderful! Is it juicy stuff?" Reia grinned. Then she looked at Hermione. "Hi. I'm Reia. My parents are from the surface, which is why I look a bit out of place amongst all these tall people." She offered her hand.

Hermione took it. "Hermione. I am from up there."

"Hermione has considerably contributed to what's going on at the moment," Severus said, pointing to the ceiling. He smirked slightly. "I doubt without her... action... everything would have happened so fast."

They exchanged more niceties until Severus interrupted. "Please excuse us. I think Hermione needs to relax some. The last few days have been rather... trying." He bowed slightly to Reia and moved further into the auditorium, this time with his hand lightly pressed on the small of Hermione's back. It felt reassuring and exhilarating.

As they moved through the crowd, the music became more audible, and suddenly, Hermione found herself facing a dance floor. A band was playing on one edge, and a few couples were dancing.

"May I have this dance, milady?" Severus bowed to her, and Hermione accepted, her memory instantly taking her back to the last time she'd danced with him in Buenos Aires. As if on cue, the first soft, longing tones of *Libertango* rang into the auditorium, prompting more couples to enter the dance floor.

At first, Hermione and Severus danced silently, giving themselves over to the rhythm and music. Eventually, Severus said, "Reia is the first generation of German inner earth dwellers who was born here. Quite a sizeable group came here after the end of the last Muggle world war. She, as well as the other Germans, has a talent for writing up flyers we occasionally distribute on the surface." He smirked. "And the information we found this afternoon will make a prominent appearance on them."

Hermione looked at him in surprise. "It's not the first time you've done that?"

"No. Pretty much all the scandals that have been uncovered over the past ten, maybe fifteen years, made their way into the media because we made sure they did. Sometimes by dropping flyers, other times by informing certain Muggles who have maintained contact with Karl or Lola or others down here. People do not like to interfere, but will do so if what's going on above affects us down here. Like pollution," he explained and pointed his head to the side. "Looks like Rose and Hugo are having a good time as well."

Distracted, Hermione followed his eyes. Rose was dancing with a tall boy not much older than herself. His hair could be considered strong competition for Lucius, Hermione mused. Hugo tangoed past his mother, beaming. His partner was a blonde girl, who looked younger than him, although she was slightly taller than Hugo.

Hermione danced one waltz with Karl while Severus chose Reia as a partner. As if by silent agreement, once the waltz was over, they headed for each other and continued to dance the night away until Hermione was unable to suppress a yawn.

"I think it's bedtime for you, young lady," Severus said, his smirk belying the sternness in his voice.

Hermione grinned tiredly as he led her off the dance floor. Rose and Hugo had decided to spend the night at Lola and Karl's home in order to be closer to their new-found friends the next day. "Come. I'll take you home."

The short journey back to his house passed in silence. Hermione barely noticed that this time they landed at a different spot, which led them straight to his front door on the other side of the cave.

Hermione hurried to the bathroom, changed and headed for bed. When the mattress dipped slightly, announcing the arrival of another, she realised she was too tired to care before falling into a deep sleep.

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A/N: For details of the prompt, please see chapter 1.

Grateful thanks to southernwitch69, as ever, for whipping this chapter into shape.

## Eighteen

*Chapter 18 of 20*

First, there were two. Now there are three. The time for magick is drawing closer.

Disclaimer: I still don't own the characters and have very little hope of ever doing so. If you've read the disclaimer at the top of each chapter, you will know that some people believe the earth to be hollow and inhabited. No paper was wasted in creating this tale. However, the electrons are actively preparing a rebellion.

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trees  
were in(give  
give)bud when to me  
you  
made for by love  
love said did  
o no yes  
earth was in  
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with all beautiful  
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me  
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song  
when to me you  
leap and i'm born we  
're sunlight of oneness  
e. e. cummings

Hermione woke up sometime during the night, knowing the man who had his arm wrapped around her midst was not Lucius, but he felt good, comfortable, and comforting, and that was all that mattered to her in her less-than half-awake state.

Then, early in the morning, she woke up again. His erection pressed firmly against her, and his hands were caressing her breasts. It felt rather pleasant.

"Severus... what are you doing?"

"What do you think I'm doing?" The low voice rumbled straight into the core of her being.

"Um..."

His hands moved downward, and she was unable to deny the promise of pleasure they offered. "Lucius..." she whispered.

"He wants this. As much as I do," the voice answered her. Its tone held complete assurance.

His hands felt... different. Gentler, and yet more... almost aggressive at the same time. She gave in. And was rewarded.

There was the twinge of pain and there was ecstasy, all simultaneous and yet worlds apart. It felt exquisite.*If only life could always be this way...*

More sleep, her body spooned against his, felt delicious.

"Oh, wonderful!"

Lucius's voice woke her. "Hm?"

"What a sight! It makes me happy!"

"Lucius." Hermione rubbed her eyes.

Severus stirred and opened his eyes. He smirked upon seeing Lucius and opened his hand in an inviting gesture.

"Love, four hands and two mouths offer more pleasure than one..." Lucius's mouth demandingly crashed down on hers, and she relished the feel of him, not giving a thought to his words.

"Let us try... Let us prove it to you..." He made short work of his clothing by Vanishing it and joined Hermione and Severus on the bed.

Hermione never had a chance to think it through. Hands caressed her from head to toe, mouths nibbled, licked, occasionally nabbed only to lightly blow over her exposed skin, making her shiver with physical delight.

One union, different fingers brushing lightly over her nipples, another mouth nuzzling *that* point on her neck. A brief withdrawal that made her want to cry out. Another union.

And then the world exploded around her, and the only conscious sensation was bliss. Perfect bliss.

A long silence followed until her first lover spoke. "See?" Lucius looked far too smug, as did Severus. But then, they had every reason to feel that way, Hermione admitted,

albeit only to herself.

"So... we've moved from us two to us three," Hermione stated the obvious. Slowly, her mind moved into gear, and she regarded Lucius with curiosity. "Tell us about your trip, love."

Lucius needed no second invitation. "And the next full moon is about ten days away. By then, I'm hopeful that Draco will have seduced the Potters, and we all will cast our magick: here, throughout the inner earth, and in London as well," he finished.

"Who would've thought... Draco and Harry." Hermione shook her head.

"I dare say that is of less importance than the fact that the world is changing rapidly and we'll be contributing to the downfall of evil," Severus said.

"Hm, yes, true," Lucius agreed and then sighed. "I feel somewhat disadvantaged here. You both have experience in defying evil, as do the Potters. I do not."

"You may not have the experience, but your mind works just fine, old man," Severus drawled. "Besides, we're in the enviable position that we have hundreds of thousands of people on our side as well as a mass-awakening to the reality on the surface of the planet. That makes it a rather unique situation, so we all start out on even grounds."

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In the following days, Severus made a habit of inviting Hugo to join him whenever he had business in the potions gardens, which the boy never failed to enthusiastically accept.

"I don't want to go back to Hogwarts," Hugo said as they were walking back to Karl's home.

"But since you have to go back, you might as well enjoy it," Severus said. "And besides, if you want to apprentice in any subject, you will need NEWTs to show you're apt."

"Can I apprentice with you, then?" Hugo asked keenly.

"If you get O's in Potions and Herbology, I might consider it." Severus's reply sounded gruff.

But the boy ignored his tone. Hugo's step immediately became springier, and he was skipping by the time they reached the garden near Karl and Lola's home where Rose was leaning against a lion on the grass, engrossed in *The Old Man and the Sea*.

"Guess what, Rose," Hugo said. "I'm going to become a Potions master when I'm grown."

"You do that," Rose said, looking up at him. "I want to be a librarian at the library here." She pointed wistfully to the dome a short distance away, which housed the largest collection of books Rose had ever seen. "Fat chance..."

The lion nudged Rose, and she got up immediately. "Thank you for letting me be so comfortable." The animal nodded and took off.

"Oh, there you are!" Karl was walking towards the three. When he reached them, he addressed Severus. "Lucius wants to take Hermione shopping. I'm sure they'll be fine in Buenos Aires, but neither knows their way around, so I think it would be advisable that you join them."

"Lucius has nothing better to do than shopping?" Severus asked and shook his head.

Karl laughed. "He mumbled something about having wanted to do this a lifetime ago. I could imagine it to be enjoyable, no?"

"I suppose... Oh, yes, Lucius was going to take her shopping that weekend in Buenos Aires, but then we ran out of time. I better humour my lady, then. And his lordship." Severus curtly nodded at Rose, Hugo, and Karl and made his way to a craft hovering near to the gardens.

He arrived to witness an animated debate about lingerie. As he entered the house, Hermione said, "No, Lucius, please. I don't care what label a bra is, seriously. I don't need *La Pearl!* As long as it's not a *Wonderbra* and looks decent enough and is comfortable, I'll be happy!"

"Darling, please let me choose them for you. You know nothing about lingerie." Lucius sounded very much his typical Malfoy superior, and Severus snorted.

"Why do you wish to buy lingerie, anyway? I prefer Hermione naked, don't you?" He smirked and continued. "Besides, I hate to burst your bubble, old man, but Argentina is more likely to provide unknown labels, individually crafted for quality rather than... fashion." The last word held a sneer to it.

Ignoring Severus's words entirely, Lucius said, "Oh, good. You're here. Can we go, then?" He looked at Severus, smiled, and opened his arms. "Give us a kiss, boy."

Severus's smirk turned into a genuine smile, and he bent down to kiss first Hermione, then Lucius.

"How are we going to get to Buenos Aires, love?" Hermione looked at him curiously.

"We'll walk up to Shackleton's Hut and Apparate from there," Severus said. "I know how to fly a craft down here, but I've never navigated one on the surface, so that's not really an option."

The three donned their cloaks and made their way through the cave up to Shackleton's Hut. The temperature seemed to drop with every step, and when they reached the hut, Hermione shuddered when she saw the well-preserved seal blubber hanging from the walls. "Yuck." She shivered, not sure whether it was from the ghastly sight or the intense cold.

Severus pulled Hermione and Lucius into an embrace and Apparated to the front of *Entrada al Paradiso*.

"You know... when all this is over and the world has righted itself, we'll come here and stay a night. In room sixty-nine," Severus said as he gazed at the building.

"What a splendid idea!" Lucius exclaimed, and Hermione snickered.

They walked to nearby Libertador, stopping increasingly often to admire the window displays of boutiques and larger shops.

Some hours and several shops later, Hermione had had enough. She had to hand it to Lucius: his taste was excellent, as was Severus's, and they had chosen several bras for her, all silk or lace, and matching underwear. She smirked at the thought that none of them were commercial labels, and Lucius was happy with the purchases. "Can we leave now? I have enough bras to last me a few years, and I'm tired of the ice-cold shops and the heat outside!"

"Good idea," Severus said. "Although, I cannot possibly resist the availability of fish here. Why don't we stop at *Los Amigos* to eat before we go back home?"

His partners nodded in agreement. "I wonder if..." Lucius started.

"Yes, exactly what I'm wondering. Come, I'll Apparate us." Severus held out his hands for Hermione and Lucius to take and Apparated to the front of *Los Amigos*.

"Wonder what?" Hermione asked. She followed the eyes of her lovers. "Oh!" Between two of the upstairs windows was now a rather large scene, showing a brown-haired witch and two wizards, one black, one blond, and two children whom Hermione instantly recognised as her own, entering a barn high up in the mountains.

"I guess we've made it to *Los Amigos* in more ways than one," Severus said wryly. "Let's go inside for dinner. I'm starving."

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As the days passed, news about happenings on the surface of earth became ever more positive. Within less than two weeks, all major Muggle currencies had collapsed. One ingenious Muggle's discovery of disabling the microchips with strong magnets spread like wildfire, and before the day was over, there was hardly a Muggle with a functioning microchip left.

The Muggle media, which had always been controlled by the same forces who exercised the power over the entire surface of the planet, suddenly started to print and record actual, unadulterated news free of spin.

Miraculously, riots never happened. Instead, it was a most peaceful revolution with everyone showing their compassionate side. Bartering became the currency of the day, and those unable and in need were simply carried along within their local communities.

The collapse of currencies was quietly followed by the collapse of all corporations. With no currency, the population turned to small-scale producers open to bartering, and chain shops, malls, and supermarkets closed down within days. Greed had finally destroyed itself.

"I have been waiting so long for this to happen," Lola said, her happiness palpable, as she gazed at the near-full moon one evening.

"I'm surprised there hasn't been any uprising," Hermione said. "Having that carpet of security pulled from right under your feet must be a shocking experience I'd imagine."

"You know... I doubt people realised just how enslaved they were until that *carpet* was pulled," Lucius said thoughtfully.

Severus nodded. "Exactly. The concept of slavery was introduced so gradually, so subtly, people thought a life with at least two jobs, what little free time they had wholly managed courtesy of peer pressure, thus leaving no time to think clearly, they never knew."

"Yes," Lola agreed. "And that's why there are no riots." She smiled at Hermione. "People now have the goal of creating a society without greed, and they are willing to pack their egos away for that. Because life is not worse without money...it is far better."

"And what's even better," Karl added, "is that tomorrow night's magick will truly set the current situation into reality to stay."

Lola nodded thoughtfully. "I wonder if we should not merely aim for freedom as a goal. We could achieve more." She looked questioningly at Karl, then glanced at Severus.

"Divine Law could be re-established on the surface," Severus suggested.

"Indeed," Lola and Karl said as one.

"Divine Law?" Hermione asked, confused.

"The law of the universe, which rules everywhere above the third dimension," Lola explained. "It is also the law of the inner earth. The highest rule is to follow the principle of service to other; hence the lack of ego."

Hermione nodded slowly. "That makes sense. It eliminates the possibility of war."

"Yes," Severus agreed. "And if we create this situation with... magick, the surface of the planet will inevitably rise into a higher dimension, leaving behind only those self-serving characters."

"Like Edwina and co," Lucius offered.

Karl smiled. "Exactly. And another important Divine Law is: as above so below. If you consider that our dimension here has been higher than that on the surface since time began, all we are doing is working *with* nature, aiding the planet to once again align and achieve balance: as above so below."

Lola looked from one to the next until she'd made eye contact with everyone. Then she addressed Lucius, Severus, and Hermione. "The full moon will rise tomorrow as the sun sets here. In London, it will rise at seven local time. Lucius, will you inform your son?"

Lucius nodded. "I'll send him my Patronus now." He got up and walked a small distance away from the group.

"Maybe you should spend your time until the rise of the moon in harmony with each other," Lola suggested. "I have made arrangements with Reia to watch over Rose and Hugo tomorrow evening. I expect most young folk will be at the auditorium and contribute to the magick with sound."

Hermione looked at her questioningly. "With sound?" She did not quite grasp the meaning.

Severus laughed. "Music, Hermione. The entire universe is made of sound, and if you know the rules, which everyone down here does, you can utilise music to positively influence the outcome of magick."

Hermione sighed. "I see there is an entire world for me to learn."

"Doesn't that make you happy?" Severus chuckled.

When Lucius returned, Severus got up. "Come. Let's go home. We should prepare for tomorrow night."

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For prompt details, please see Chapter One.

Most grateful thanks go to southernwitch69 for making this tale readable. Thanks are also extended to blue\_paris for enlightening me on what a Malfoy would consider decent lingerie and what would be highly unlikely to wear for someone as closely acquainted with Lucius as Hermione is.

## Nineteen

*Chapter 19 of 20*

The full moon rises over the northern hemisphere while the inner sun performs a spectacular display of colours before

giving way to the dark and two wizards and one witch engage in a sacred ritual that will change the world.

Disclaimer: I still don't own the characters and am unlikely to ever do so. The belief that the earth...or any planet...is hollow and inhabited is not new. No paper was wasted in creating this tale. However, the electrons are as impressed with being worked so hard as Hermione was with some nitwits wanting to take over the wizarding world.

---

When Hermione woke up, her first thought was, *Tonight is full moon. The world as we know it will cease to exist.*

"That's a very dramatic thought," Severus said, yawning. "Good morning, love." He stretched.

"Good morning. But it's a true..." Hermione stopped and looked at him, frowning. "How did you know? You weren't using Legilimency."

Severus chuckled. "I have no need for it here. When one follows the Divine Law, there is no hiding of the truth."

"But I didn't even know about any of this until yesterday!" Hermione's face wore a look of incredulity. "How can I follow a law I'm not even aware of?"

"Because it is a knowledge that is rooted deep within us. We are part of the whole...everyone is. So you may not know it consciously, but certainly instinctively," Severus explained.

"And you've never been self-serving either, love," Lucius said on the other side of her.

Upon Lucius's predatory glance, Severus frowned. "I suggest abstinence until the moon rises."

Lucius pouted, and Hermione was unable to suppress a snort. "Aw, poor Lucius" she purred. "You know... you could make breakfast to take your mind off frivolities."

Severus grinned. "What an excellent idea!"

"I suppose I don't have a choice, do I?" Lucius grumbled and made a show of getting up very slowly.

"Look at it as an exercise of service to others." Severus smirked.

\*

Much later in the day, the trio went outside to watch the sun set. As if the inner sun knew of the importance of the day, it offered a spectacular performance of rainbow colours dancing in the sky. Spellbound, the three watched the splendid display of hues interacting playfully, melting, joining to reappear in another colour, continuing until the setting sun faded completely to offer darkness its nightly chance to rule.

"Come. Let's go inside and save the world." Severus's voice sounded far too casual.

Hermione's insides were roiling. "You are so laid back about it," she said, her voice shaking.

"Am I really?" His eyes glinted, but his voice was not as steady as she was used to.

Lucius was silent during the short walk back home. As they entered the bedroom, he lit all the candles and then turned to Hermione. "My lady? Allow me to undress you."

Hermione nodded her consent, her mouth too dry to speak.

Lucius carefully...reverently...took off Hermione's clothing while Severus started to take Lucius's layers off. When both were naked, Hermione and Lucius shared the task of ensuring Severus to be equally undressed before all three moved to the bed in one smooth movement.

"The goal. Let's focus on the goal." Severus leant against the headboard and pulled Hermione into his arms.

She worried momentarily that focus might be impossible, but then, a wave of powerful magic washed over her, embraced her, and took her worry with it as it dissipated. "May Divine Law rule the planet," she whispered as she relaxed against Severus.

Lucius echoed her words and bent his head to capture first Hermione's mouth and then Severus's. Next he bestowed feather-light kisses along her neckline and down her torso while Severus's fingers encouraged her nipples to stand up. Hermione shivered with pleasure and sighed contentedly.

"The focus. Don't forget the focus," Severus reminded her in his lowest rumble.

"Divine Law..."

Lucius shifted her slightly so she was next to Severus, with Lucius now focusing on her core and Severus placing kisses on her midsection, his hands slowly moving downward.

Then, one finger inside her, one thumb circling, only to be pushed away and replaced by another thumb, equally determined, yet equally gentle, as if afraid to cause harm if applied too firmly.

Severus moved on top of her, facing her core. Her right hand moved to grab him, and she took him in her mouth while her left went in search of Lucius, who instantly guided her to her destination.

Her mouth licking, laving, sucking, her hand rhythmically moving up and down, occasionally squeezing, while two mouths and four hands tended to her body's wants, including those she'd never known it had, it did not take long for the world to shatter around all three of them, closely followed by a wave of the most extraordinary magic either had ever experienced.

Their arms and legs still tangled with each other, Hermione, Lucius, and Severus fell into a fitful sleep.

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When Hermione woke up, it was still dark. She smiled when she felt Severus's arm on her stomach, his hand holding Lucius's. She'd never tire of waking up between the two. Wistfully, Hermione wondered what the future would bring, now that the trio's task was accomplished. Then she wondered if it was at all.

"We'll think about it later," Lucius advised sleepily. "Go back to sleep, love."

Laughter from outside woke her up next. Light flooded into the bedroom through the quartz ceiling.

"Ah. I think we have visitors." Severus got up and Summoned his bathrobe on his way to the front door.

Hermione smiled when she heard her son's excited voice. "Please, Severus! Come with us! Karl said we can even stop in London!"

"I guess it really *is* time to get up, eh?" Lucius asked, his smile almost regretful. "I could happily not get up for another few hours."

"Yes, same here," Hermione agreed, failing to suppress a yawn as she headed to the bathroom. "But judging by the light, we've had lots of sleep."

Severus returned to the bedroom, looking pleased. "Karl wants to go up to the surface to inspect our... handiwork."

"Great idea." Hermione had re-entered the bedroom in time to hear Severus's words. "I've always wanted to travel in a flying saucer." She grinned.

"Can we stop by the Potters'?" Lucius asked as he finally left the bed.

Severus quirked his eyebrow. "Surely, you can't be that keen on the Potters suddenly, Lucius?"

"Idiot." Lucius's tone was affectionate. "I'd like to see my son."

Hermione was pleasantly surprised when she entered the kitchen. Hugo and Karl were putting the finishing touches to a breakfast befitting kings and queens.

"This looks wonderful," Hermione said. "I didn't realise I was hungry."

Karl laughed. "We ate about twice as much as usual this morning. Mind you, we all deserve it!" He looked exceptionally happy.

"Food. Excellent!" Lucius said as he and Severus entered the kitchen.

"And coffee," Severus added and poured three cups before sitting down opposite Hermione and Lucius.

Lola and Rose arrived. "That craft is the most exciting form of transport," Rose said with utter conviction.

Lola smiled. "Better than brooms, yes?"

"Infinitely." Rose nodded.

"Are we going, then?" Hugo asked, his face shining with excitement.

"Yes, we'll go as soon as we've eaten."

Travelling in the large, disc-shaped craft was a new, exhilarating experience for Lucius, Hermione, and the children. The temperature inside was pleasant, and none of its passengers noticed the climate becoming progressively colder as they neared the largest exit to the surface. They travelled along the shore of the inner ocean, and gradually, the vegetation turned from luscious green to sparse until chunks of ice replaced the flora entirely. Then, the craft ascended, and one moment, they stared in awe at the large ice-shelves beneath them, just to find themselves above the Andes the next, flying so fast it was impossible to make out more than shapes.

"Please slow down," Rose begged. "I want to see where we're going."

"We will shortly," Lola promised. "Out here, there really is not much to see but ragged mountains. As soon as we reach interesting territory, we'll slow down and descend."

Minutes later, mountains decreased to hills, interchanging with deep valleys, until the hills faded to mostly flat countryside. Hermione noticed a city in the distance, and before she voiced the question of where they were, Karl said, "Let's make a quick stop at El Paradiso and hear what Pedro has to say."

As if navigated by unseen hands, the craft landed in the garden of the hotel.

"Ah, the earthlings are back." Pedro stood between his back door and the craft as the group climbed out one after another. He grinned and embraced first Lola and Karl and then everyone else.

"Come in. We've been celebrating since around midnight."

"Do I hear tango music?" Lucius quirked his eyebrow at Pedro, who snorted.

"Of course you do. This is Buenos Aires, my friend! Come in, come in, join the festivities!" He motioned for the group to follow him inside.

Karl smiled indulgently at Lola and took her hand. "Come. I know you cannot resist."

Lucius took Hermione's hand. "I believe it's my turn. Severus had that pleasure recently. Must ensure the balance."

Inside, the lobby had been magically enlarged to accommodate the many local wizards and witches who had all flocked to Pedro's hotel as soon as the profound change in energy had become evident.

Lucius led Hermione to the dance floor, and finally, Hermione noticed the change in the atmosphere. The hotel had been a relaxing place when she and Lucius had visited previously, but now, there was a palpable air of freedom and joy. "I wonder if London will feel the same," Hermione mused as Lucius led her expertly across the dance floor.

"Yes, me too," Lucius said. "Argentina, at least the wizarding part, has never been as subjected to draconian measures as we in the northern hemisphere. No doubt we'll find out soon."

The impromptu dancing session finished far too quickly for Hermione's taste, but Karl was insistent. "We want to check out other parts of the surface world, too," he said and smiled. "You can come back here any time, you know?"

"When we get to London, we should look in on Kingsley, too," Lucius said as they sat down in the craft once more. "But first, Draco."

The craft rose slowly, and suddenly, Rose giggled. "Look, people are staring at us!" She pointed down to the street where groups of people gawked in wonder at the flying saucer above the houses.

Lola smiled. "People on the surface of earth associate our type of craft with extra-terrestrials. I trust they will soon learn the truth."

"No cloaking?" Severus asked with a frown.

Karl shrugged. "The powers that no longer be cannot hide the truth, so there is no need for us to hide. They were the only ones who threatened us. Most people are naturally curious and will sense that we're no threat to them."

Rose frowned. "When we return to Hogwarts, will you take us in this craft?"

"Oh, yes, please!" Hugo exclaimed. "That would be so cool!"

Karl and Lola smiled, but Severus snorted. "You didn't strike me as an attention seeker, young man," he said disdainfully.



Hugo blushed. "I didn't think of it that way. It's just that it's such a great form of travelling."

Hermione ruffled his hair when she saw Hugo's stricken face. "Don't worry. I know you didn't think it great for the potential of gaining attention."

Lucius bent down and whispered something in Hugo's ear, which seemed to cheer him up considerably.

"All right, we're approaching the British Isles. Time to slow down again," Karl said, and the craft descended once more as they reached low hills of the English countryside.

"Just how fast is this... thing?" Lucius asked. "We can't have left Buenos Aires more than half an hour ago."

"That sounds about right," Lola said. "You see, once you're no longer locked into gravity, it becomes very easy to travel across time and space at speeds greater than light." She smiled and added, "I'm sure you will comprehend some time. Conventional physics, as taught here on the surface of earth, deny many possibilities."

The craft had now reached the outskirts of London and, minutes later, landed in the back garden of number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

"Rosie!" a voice squeaked excitedly, and a much younger version of the boy who lived flew into Rose's arms.

She laughed. "Albus Severus Potter! I'm glad to see you've not changed one bit!" She hugged him tightly.

"Did I hear that right?" Severus asked Hermione, his voice filled with utter disbelief.

Hermione grinned. "You did indeed. His name is Albus Severus."

Severus sighed. "Poor boy." He was cut short when the kitchen door opened to reveal the Potters and Draco, all grinning.

"Come in, let's party!" Draco made an inviting gesture while Harry and Ginny walked towards Hermione who was standing next to Severus.

"Professor Snape! I had trouble believing Harry when he said you're alive, but I'mso happy!" Ginny said and then turned to greet her friend while Harry shook hands with Severus and then Lucius.

After introducing Lola and Karl, the adults headed for the kitchen, which these days showed more of a resemblance to The Burrow's kitchen than the cold atmosphere of the former Black residence. The Potter children ran up the stairs with Rose and Hugo in tow.

"Have you been out yet?" Lucius asked Draco.

Harry and Draco grinned. "Oh, yeah," said Draco. "It's like being in a fairytale world. Muggles are no longer miserable. They smile at everyone, and you don't even hear any snarky comments about robes or cloaks. It's rather a novelty! People seem to be genuinely happy."

"That is good to hear," Karl said. "We were hoping for that effect."

Lola nodded, then looked at Severus and started, "I wonder if..."

He smirked slightly. "Yes. We should convince Kingsley, perhaps, to set the trial after the next full moon. It should take no longer than one lunar cycle for the energy to set..."

Karl's eyes widened. "As mischievous as ever when it's least expected," he muttered as Lola laughed and Severus's smirk widened into a grin.

Ginny served tea and biscuits when the door flung open and Scorpius ran into Lucius's arms. "Grandpa! Rose only just mentioned you're here, too!"

Lucius hugged him tightly and then held him at arms' length. "Look at you! You've grown at least a foot since I last saw you!" His voice was filled with obvious pride. Next, he pulled him closer again and ran a hand through his grandson's hair, which was reaching down to the boy's shoulders. "Good, good. Your hair is as soft as mine, unlike your father's." He looked satisfied, and Hermione could not help but grin. She'd never thought of Lucius as a grandfatherly type, but she'd evidently been wrong, and for the moment, she thought fondly of the Malfoy trademark hair. *Lucky girl who catches Scorpius...*

Scorpius did not seem to care about the state of his hair. "Grandpa, I want to visit inside the earth, too. Rose and Hugo said it's like paradise, and animals talk, and everyone is friendly." His face now wore the typical Malfoy pout.

Before Lucius could answer, the door opened again, this time to reveal the rest of the children. Hugo determinedly headed for the Potter-Malfoy trio and said, with a mischievous glance in Severus's direction, "I have a question: What kind of teacher was Severus?"

The smug grin on Lucius's face did not escape Hermione, and she rolled her eyes.*That's what he whispered at Hugo in the craft...*

All three started speaking at once.

"Quite horrible mostly, but we learned later it was all show because he was a spy," Harry said so fast, it seemed his words were gushing out from some compulsion.

"I learned a lot, but he really hated Gryffindors and was very unfair towards them. I only understood some time later that he had to be biased against Gryffindors because of his work as a spy," Ginny said.

"He wasn't bad. We all probably learned more about Potions than any other subject," Draco said and grinned. "But I'm biased. I'm a Slytherin like he is, and besides, he saved my sanity. And my life. Without him, Voldemort would never have been defeated."

Hugo nodded thoughtfully. "Thank you." Then he turned to Severus. "I want to apprentice with you after my NEWTs."

"All right. You know what the deal is," Severus replied with a slight smirk. Then he turned to Karl and Lola. "Probably less than one lunar cycle."

Lola laughed. "And now you have everyone wondering what it's all about." Looking at Harry and Ginny, then at Hermione and Lucius, she said, "Lucius, you didn't expect completely truthful answers to Hugo's question, did you?"

Lucius shook his head. "Not exactly." He shrugged and grinned. "I expected a lot of squirming and no straight answers."

Everyone laughed, but quieted quickly when Lola spoke again. "Only in the third dimension is lying possible. What our... magick did is raise the entire planet sufficiently to enter the next dimension. It may take a few days or weeks for the earth to anchor it, but we are well on our way, as Ginny's, Harry's, and Draco's answer to Hugo's question showed." She smiled and received genuine smiles in return.

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The profound change on the entire planet became evident within days, amongst wizards and Muggles alike. Anyone with a conscience, no matter what wrongs they'd committed in the past, had risen to an entirely new level of honesty. Deception, self-serving power gains and miseries resulting from such, no longer seemed to exist. There was a compulsion to speak truth, and only truth, in everybody.

A week after their first visit to the Potters, Hermione, Severus, and Lucius visited again, this time on Merlin's back and with the goal to see Kingsley about setting a trial date for Edwina.

Once Kingsley got over the fact that Severus Snape was alive, he got straight to business. Looking smugly at Hermione, he said, "I have some news for you. A Mr Wilson was caught in your office snooping around after hours."

Hermione grinned. "And? Did he find anything?"

Lucius asked, "Who caught him?"

"Abigail was still there, just about to leave. Mr Wilson walked right past her...he obviously didn't see her...so she followed him and watched him trying to gain access to your computer. Then she put him in a full Body Bind and had him arrested."

"That is a promising development," Severus said, smirking. "If he couldn't see her, it means he's stuck in the third dimension."

"Oh, is that what it is?" Kingsley asked. "You see, Edwina does not appear to be able to see anyone. Everytime someone checks on her in her cell, she shrieks and mutters about Dementors coming to Kiss her." He frowned.

They stayed a while longer, Severus explaining how it was likely for the planet to take a few days or weeks to settle into the new dimension and that it would be beneficial for the trial to be set after that time.

Then Kingsley turned to Hermione. "I know we've done you very wrong./I have, by simply listening to Ron, and I'd like to make it up to you, Hermione. If you don't want to return to MLE here, just pick your job and it's yours."

Hermione frowned. She had not really thought about her future beyond the full moon ritual. She looked from Lucius to Severus and noticed both wizards looking at her intently. "... I don't know, Kingsley."

"Why don't you give her a few days to decide, Kingsley," Lucius suggested.

"Yes, that would be good," Hermione agreed and heard Severus breathe a slight sigh of...was that relief?*What do I want to do?*she wondered, but then her attention shifted back to Severus who had stood up. They made their way back to Grimmauld Place and took off on Merlin, back to their sanctuary in the inner earth.

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A/N: For prompt details, please see Chapter One.

Most grateful thanks go to southernwitch69 for the beta.

## Twenty

*Chapter 20 of 20*

Five years later, all is well.

Disclaimer: I have never owned the characters and still do not. There is plenty of evidence that suggests that the earth...or any planet...is hollow and inhabited. Probably more so than evidence to the contrary. Paper was not wasted in creating this tale for the simple reason that my printer decided to rebel and I was unable to print anything. However, the electrons... well, let's not even go there. They were peeved enough to break two computers during the writing of this fic. I am so not amused. Who'd have thought electrons have a mind of their own?

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For the sixth time, Hermione woke up to the twelfth full moon of the year sandwiched between Lucius and Severus. She stretched languorously, knowing very well the effect it would have on her two wizards.

"Oh... *that* day," Lucius said, his voice full of sleep but his hands very much awake.

"Oi, don't leave me out!" Severus demanded, his hands suddenly becoming equally active.

"Divine Law," Hermione whispered.

"Always, love," two voices answered in unison while four hands made their way from her neck downward, caressing her with feather-light touches, tickling her just so, applying some pressure where they knew she'd appreciate it, each mouth busy with one nipple, and then took turns stimulating her core until she came undone.

Just as the love-making had become a magical ritual, so had the reminiscing that followed on this day.

When Lucius started, "Remember when..." both Severus and Hermione grinned.

"The trial?" Hermione asked. "Yes, I do. Vividly so."

Lucius shook his head slowly. "It still amazes me that you let her get away. I mean, you could have asked for a life sentence in Azkaban, and yet, you asked for no judgement."

Severus chuckled. "Ah. Lucius, learning ever so slowly in your old age." The look he cast him was affectionate.

Hermione snorted and turned to her blond lover. "She was, at that point, already unable to see us. Entirely stuck in a dimension we'd just left behind where the only others around were as lost as she; all were, and probably still are, entirely self-serving. In Azkaban, she'd have a comfortable life compared to what she ended up having, being surrounded by self-serving beings who fight over control and instil fear amongst each other." Hermione stopped for a moment. "Her day of judgement will be here soon enough, but it wasn't my responsibility to pass it on her. I have a feeling she's perfectly capable of doing that herself."

"Clever witch," Severus said in a low voice that awakened her passion anew.

"Indeed," Lucius agreed and pulled her closer. "I understand. I'm in awe how fast you had grasped the idea, considering that woman turned your life upside down."

Hermione laughed. "And for that I shall be forever grateful to her."

Following that statement, her lovers once again indulged in the delight of pleasuring their witch. Two hands slowly travelled down one side while another two busied themselves with the other, occasionally as slowly, but mostly with intent, determined to find their destination to become the cause of the greatest pleasure.

Hermione shuddered with anticipation as she realised it was an occasion for playful competition between the two wizards.

One hand was caressing her breast while the other found her core. Another hand attended to the nipple of her other breast as its partner stroked gently down her torso with feather-light touches. Then the hand left it in favour of its owner's mouth, the tongue of which nibbled, licked, retreated. She felt air blow over the nipple, and a whimper escaped her.

Severus switched his position now and guided one of her hands to his shaft while ignoring her other, which grabbed a fistful of sheets as Lucius slowly entered her.

As soon as an easy rhythm was established...her hand's up-and-down movement in unison with Lucius's up-and-down movement inside her...Severus bent down to her core. His tongue flicked over it, licked it, nabbed it gently, and then he blew over it only for his tongue to start again.

Competition, no matter how friendly and playful, was forgotten now as the three focused on pleasure, not for themselves, but each focusing on granting the world's available, abundant supply to the other, thus multiplying the pleasure for each one, reflecting it out into the universe, ensuring unlimited abundance for days, weeks, and years to come.

*The perfect opposite of a vicious circle*, Hermione thought dazedly as her insides contracted and announced the reflection of Creation.

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Later in the day, Severus left to tend to his still-thriving potions business with Lola, Lucius took off to visit Karl, and Hermione headed to the library in Agharta where Rose studied under the ancient librarian who was preparing to relocate to Utopia to join the Council of the Wise and hand over the reins of the library to Rose.

Before Hermione even entered the library, she could feel Rose's particularly exuberant joy. Living beneath the surface of the earth...with a distinct lack of any form of negativity...had made her senses much more acute, her perception much clearer, and had wrought an inner comprehension that went far beyond the meaning of the word.

"Hello, sweetheart," Hermione greeted her daughter, grateful that they once again lived near each other. "How are you doing?"

Rose beamed at her. "I have news, Mum."

Hermione smiled. Her intuition had been right again. "Oh?" she asked.

Rose nodded. "Hugo is joining us for dinner at Hogwarts tonight and then coming back here with us to start his apprenticeship with Severus!"

"Oh, wonderful, darling!" Then, Hermione grinned. "Has he had enough of Ron?"

Rose laughed. "I don't think he ever *wanted* to stay with him. He felt the need to help Dad get back to normal, and I think he's achieved that. Dad has spent long enough regretting what he did, and it's time for him to move on and have a life."

"My bright girl," Hermione said, her voice filled with pride. "I'm glad to see Ron live a happy life again. And I'm so happy that Hugo is joining us!" They talked for a while longer, and then Hermione returned home to get ready for the evening out.

Later on, Rose arrived with the craft, and they left for Hogwarts, Severus and Rose bantering over who should steer the craft, which had become a tradition ever since both had mastered the skill with Karl's assistance.

It was dark when the craft landed silently a few steps from Hogwarts' majestic front doors, which opened the moment the four climbed down the ladder.

"Oh, it's so good to see you again! We really should make this more than an annual occasion," Minerva said as she embraced each one. When she reached Severus, she held him at arms' length. "You still don't look a day older, dear," she stated and pulled him close. "Hermione is good for you."

"As is Lucius," Severus said, his voice austere, and Minerva nodded hesitantly.

"I'll never get my head around you three being together, forgive me. Or the Potters and young Mr Malfoy. They're here already, as is Hugo and his father, so let's go inside."

Hermione was grateful for the suggestion. Spending most of the year in an environment with a constant, comfortable temperature left her sensitive to the harsh Scottish winter weather. She also felt the tug of impatience of seeing her godchild again. Levanah had been born thirty-eight weeks after the magickal ritual. She had the Malfoy hair...blonde, full, and straight...but she had Harry's striking, green eyes.

The group reached the dining room, and enthusiastic greetings were exchanged with those already present. Levanah flew into Hermione's arms and hugged her fiercely. "It is wonderful to see you again," she said, and Hermione was again instantly awed by the child's incredible maturity. She might look like a child, had a voice that clearly was very young, but there the resemblance ended. Her speech had never been childlike since the day she'd begun to talk, her choice of words always sophisticated, and her wisdom evident.

"I'm happy to see you, too, love," Hermione said softly as she hugged the child.

"That is good." Levanah looked at Hermione with a mischievous glint in her eyes that reminded the witch of a young Harry. "I wish to visit you and Severus and Grandpa," she said matter-of-factly.

Standing next to Hermione, Ginny sighed. "I think you are too young to stay anywhere overnight."

Levanah shook her head impatiently. "My soul is older than yours, Daddy's, and Father's combined. How can I be too young to stay for a few days with people I love?"

Hermione distinctly recognised the Malfoy confidence in her godchild and grinned. "You'll have to leave it to your mum, Levanah. I'll be happy to have you any time."

"And Lola would love to meet this young lady." Severus had approached the two witches unnoticed, and Levanah squealed, spreading her arms, and flew into Severus's arms without another glance at Hermione. While he hugged the child, he asked conversationally, "Did you know Lola is a Moonchild? She was also the only one until Levanah's birth."

"Lola?" Ginny asked. "She is one amazing woman!"

Hermione nodded thoughtfully, remembering how out of bounds she had felt when she'd first met her and Karl. "What was the occasion for her conception, do you know?" she asked Severus.

He grinned. "I believe the goal was to bring about the end of the American Civil War."

Two pairs of eyes stared at him incredulously. "She's *that* old?" asked Hermione.

Severus laughed. "Yes. And Karl is a good fifty years older. Does it surprise you? Do I look like mid-sixties? And I've only lived there a quarter of a century. Look at yourself! Have you aged in the past few years? You look younger now than you did the first time we met in Buenos Aires, love."

"Oh, she does," Lucius drawled and invited his grandchild into his arms, who promptly complied, her face one of angelic joy.

Minerva interrupted the chatting by calling everyone to the table where dishes of scrumptious-looking food had appeared in typical Hogwarts manner seemingly out of nowhere.

As Hermione sat down between Severus and Lucius, she noticed Ron for the first time since they'd arrived. "Ron," she said softly.

He looked straight up at her. "Hermione."

Hermione smiled. Luna was seated next to him, and there was a clear cord that connected the two.

"Hermione." Luna smiled at her. "I hope you don't mind. I've always had a soft spot for Ronald, and I didn't feel guilty, as I knew there was no accord between the two of you."

Feeling hands on her legs on either side of her, she smiled. "No, that's perfectly fine, Luna. I hope you and Ron will be happy together."

Ron seemed to choke on whatever he was eating. "Thanks, Hermione," he coughed. "Appreciate it."

She turned to look at Lucius, then at Severus, and she smiled at both of them. Next, she looked at Rose, who was sitting suspiciously close to Scorpius Malfoy, and then to Hugo, who was seated between Minerva and Severus. Hugo, her little boy, would start his apprenticeship with Severus in a few days. Rose was already well on her way in taking over the library of Agharta.

Levanah caught her eye. The little girl smiled widely at her, and Hermione couldn't help smiling back. She could almost hear the little girl thinking *I won't be the only Moonchild for long.*

Life was good.

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For prompt details, please see Chapter One.

Macshefa, whose Hebrew skills rule as much as she does, went out of her way to find a name for the Potter-Malfoy trio's daughter, born out of a magickal ritual. I asked her for a suitable translation for Moonchild, and she provided it. Thank you!

Southern\_Witch\_69 has turned this into a readable tale, and I owe her great thanks for that. Further thanks go to HogwartsClassof91 and kittylefish for jumping in as betas when SW69's internet was knocked out for a few weeks by Hurricane Gustav. Many thanks also go to blue\_paris for the artwork and the education on lingerie. Both were enlightening! Mistakes are mine.

More thanks to kittylefish and HogwartsClassof91 for concrit in this last chapter.

Thank you for accompanying me through this tale. Thank you for reading, thank you for reviewing, and thank you for voting this into third place of the Potter\_Place Anything Goes Challenge.