

CHAPTER 14

MALFOY MANSION

The midnight reception of Lucius Malfoy's urgent owl requesting Hannah's attendance at a Death Eater's meeting sent her trekking alone through the chilly darkness and along a narrow winding bridleway to reach his elite abode in Wiltshire, of Southwest England. The soles of her fitted leather boots crunched subtly upon the road's crumbly earthen surface as she traveled the extensive length of the path, over the sloping green hills, and through midnight tufts of cloudy mists, which lolled in the hollows of the outer grounds, settling densely into the valley of the adjacent Muggle town.

Malfoy Manor was undoubtedly the most striking vision in all of Wiltshire; Impeccably constructed of solid white Cotswold stone in a traditional forward facing E shape, the estate sat proudly upon the steep cresting ridges of grassy open downs, overlooking a Victorian inspired village at the foot of the chalk escarpment below. Solid brushes of towering trees bordered the rear and sides of the manor, leaving the front of the domain largely open parkland bounded by endless flourishing English gardens and exquisitely sculptured fountains. A tall white stone wall encircled the outer bounds of the estate and stood ornately polished by a silver-gated entrance, where fixed upon its splendid pillars were two time-faced intertwined serpents. Though the remarkable property remained highly visible to all witches, wizards, and Muggles alike, it had been cleverly bewitched to make unwelcome passersby feel the impelling urge to evacuate the premises with the swift certainty that they were being hunted by some noxious, maniacal specter.

When Hannah entered the grand-gated-entrance of the estate, she was unexpectedly relinquished into the open arms of one Draco Malfoy, who stood tall and swollen with pride among four burly men in restless anticipation of her arrival. Much as she struggled not to award Draco the glory of knowing how thoroughly impressed she was with the breathtaking scenery of her surroundings, the hauntingly beautiful landscape and the enchanting fragrance of the property's infinite blossoming wildflowers left her far too noticeably entranced to hide it.

"Hannah Morley, such a *pleasure* it is to see you. May I take your arm?" said Draco dramatically, bowing low, and looking entirely pleased with himself.

Hannah rolled her eyes and retorted sharply, "I'm quite capable of walking on my own, Draco. Besides, I'd rather you NOT touch me."

"Have it your way," he said snappishly, returning to his pompous stance.

"What's with the four Goliaths lurking at the front gates?" said Hannah, motioning over her shoulder at the four burly men who had received her.

“They’re my bodyguards,” said Draco importantly.

“Ah, yes, of course. The prominent existence of Draco Malfoy wouldn’t be complete without the employment of four human tree trunks to implement for you the finest security measures known to wizarding-kind,” said Hannah obnoxiously.

“They happen to be *highly intelligent* and *gifted* wizards!” said Draco snappishly.

“Hmm, yes, indeed. I do believe one of them nearly blinked of his own accord.”

“They’re not there to *socialize*. They’ve been specifically instructed to watch over *me* and the *premises!*”

Hannah shrugged her shoulders dismissively and said, “Whatever. So, where’s Severus? He was to meet me at the gates.”

“Mum sent me, instead.”

“Of course she did,” said Hannah sounding irked. She proceeded along the cobblestone pathway at an ever-quickenning pace.

“What’s your hurry? The meeting doesn’t start for another fifteen minutes. Let’s enjoy the walk,” said Draco trying to lock her arm in his.

“I’ve asked you *not* to touch me!” snapped Hannah, jerking away from him.

“What’s with you? I’m only trying to be a gentleman!”

“Hmph! Just as you were when you attacked me in the potions closet at Hogwarts last spring and in Severus’s home only weeks ago. Call me foolish, but I don’t trust you any further than I can jinx you, Draco!”

“Hannah, you know how deeply I care for you, how desperately I’ve wanted you since the first day we met. I just lost control of my emotions, is all.”

“Oh, give it a rest, Draco! What you did to me was dreadful and unacceptable! Luckily, for me, Severus was there to stop you!”

Draco puckered his brows and inquired darkly, “What do you see in Severus Snape anyway? He lives in that run-down old heap of bricks. He’s *old*.”

“He’s not *old!*”

“*Ol-der.*”

“I love him,” said Hannah simply.

“Look around you, Hannah!” said Draco with a compelling rasp in his tenor while he raised his hands in the air like he were some kind of God. “*Look at all you could have if you were with me.*”

“Draco, my parents left me with more money than I could possibly spend in ten lifetimes. I don’t need your riches.” She eyed him suspiciously and inquired, “What do you truly fancy from me, anyway? You know very well that I’m *not a pure-blood.*”

“I’m willing to overlook that flaw in you,” said Draco silkily.

“*FLAW!*” scoffed Hannah, thoroughly insulted and coming to a screeching halt before him. “Tell me, Draco. What exactly would you do with me if I conceded to your wishes, hmm? Shag me until you grew weary of my flesh, then cast me ruthlessly aside?”

“*No.* I wish to marry you,” he said assertively.

“Ha, ha, ha! *Marry me?* Is your mother aware of your heart’s desire?”

“*Yes.*”

“*Liar!* I happen to know for a fact that she expects you to wed pure-blood Pansy Parkinson!”

“What difference does it make? My mother has no say in who I see. Besides, my father adores you. He could convince her to allow it.”

“Draco, your mother loathes me nearly as much as I loathe her. She’d sooner see me dead before she’d allow us be together. And as for your father, he’s fond of my good looks, big boobs, and shapely legs. He’d allow me to be a plaything for you, a mistress, perhaps, but not a wife. Moreover...you’re not my type.”

“What exactly is it about me that you *don’t* like?” inquired Draco discouragingly.

“I think it would be more prudent for me to list the things that I *do* like about you. It would take me less effort,” said Hannah sincerely.

Draco scowled.

“Forgive me, Draco. I don’t mean to be rude, but as you can imagine, I’m still quite bitter about the night you attacked me.”

“I’ve apologized to you for it!”

“*No,* you haven’t,” countered Hannah resolutely. “You’ve excused your behavior, rationalized it with your declaration of your so-called ‘*fondness*’ for me.”

“But it’s true! *I love you!*” declared Draco strongly.

“Draco, *enough!* Your efforts on me are *wasted*. As long as I am of sound mind and body, I can assure you that you will *never* have me.”

Upon the swift close of her words, Draco’s face flooded with a look befitting one who has a most brilliant idea. The look was one that that made Hannah shudder down to the core of her very being.

“Hannah,” uttered a tall shadowy figure leaning against one of the columns of the front portico of the manor.

“Severus!” she responded with relief, hurrying up the shallow stone staircase and into his arms. “It seems like *ages* since I’ve seen you last.”

“How are you?” he inquired, granting her a long delectable kiss.

Draco surveyed them with sheer revulsion, as though their act was most indecent.

“I’m a bit sleepy, but otherwise alright,” said Hannah, smoothing her hand along side of Snape’s face.

“I see Mr. Malfoy escorted you. I trust there were no...*issues?*”

“No. Although I’m rather disappointed; I thought *you* were to be the one to come for me,” said Hannah with a prominent pout.

“I would have, however, Narcissa asked to have a last minute word with me in private before the start of the meeting.

Hannah let out a low disgruntled hiss.

“Come,” said Severus dismissively, guiding her into the mansion. “Everyone is waiting for us.”

The instant she crossed over the threshold and beheld her surroundings, Hannah gasped instinctively aloud, “Wow!”

The interior of the Manor, from floor to ceiling, was splendidly finished in solid white and black swirled marble. A magnificent silver burnished lit chandelier hung low from the rounded cathedral ceiling bathing the entryway in a soft romantic golden glow.

Draco grinned proudly, and said, “Fantastic, isn’t it? Mother hired the finest wizarding decorators money could buy.”

“Indeed,” said Hannah brusquely, fingering over the ornately carved columns that lined the outskirts of the corridors. She marveled at the tall stone ornamented vases positioned stylishly throughout the space, which housed stunning bouquets of fragrant wildflowers. Her eyes addressed the impressive collection of fine Celtic art freckling the walls and the superior renaissance style of black leather furniture that garnished the open sitting area of the main living space.

“Would you like to see my bedroom, Hannah?” inquired Draco eagerly.

“Mr. Malfoy, I believe we can save that for another time. The meeting’s about to begin,” chimed Snape impatiently.

“Perhaps later, Draco,” added Hannah distractedly. She had stepped to a halt before the wide semi-circle of unmasked Death Eaters assembled in the center of the black-leather-clad living space. She circled her gaze about the group of nearly two dozen witches and wizards, and much to her amazement, she was not the slightest bit nervous to make their acquaintance. Though she had met the Malfoys, Wormtail, Crabbe, and Goyle, the remaining members of the group remained complete strangers to her.

“Well, if it isn’t the infamous ‘*Ms. Hannah Morley*’,” said Bellatrix Lestrange, uncurling herself from her cat-like pose on the corner of the leather clad couch.

The years spent in Azkaban were not kind to Bellatrix. The once dark haired blue-eyed beauty looked almost overly used at first glance. Her heavy lidded eyes were watery and gray; her face was sunken so severely, it was as though all the tissue beneath her skin had been sucked clean off its bones. Her imperious manner, however, was one that had never waned.

She stepped forward with an egotistical temper, announcing boldly, “Dumbledore’s pride and glory, his *ghost warrior*. You look awfully small to be effective. I’ve seen more meat on skeletons.”

Snape scowled and jeered, “Jealousy is so unbecoming of you, Bella.”

Hannah smirked and sauntered toward Bella, rambling benevolently, “Oh, I don’t know, Severus. I’d say by the looks of her it is undoubtedly her finest quality.”

“Hmm. Cheeky little stray, but is she quick on the draw?” growled Bella eerily, casing Hannah with the comportment of a hungry wolf about to pounce.

“EXPELLIARMUS!” bellowed Hannah.

The incantation disarmed Bella and sent her soaring clear across the room into one of the tall, fancifully carved columns in the corridor with such force the fixture cracked from floor to ceiling.

Severus and several of the other Death Eaters chortled loudly.

“YOU *BITCH!*” Bella roared at Hannah.

“You were about to hit me with the Cruciatus Curse! I’d say *you’re* the *bitch!*” snarled Hannah.

“How *dare* you treat my sister in such a disgraceful manner!” hissed Narcissa to Hannah. “And in my home, no less!” Narcissa’s cold blue eyes pulsed with rage as she rushed to Bella’s aid.

“I was defending myself, *CISSY!*” sneered Hannah.

“Defending yourself from *what?* Bella didn’t utter a word!” hollered Narcissa.

“Oh, *give me a break*, Narcissa! It was a *silent* spell!” shouted Hannah.

“If it was a *silent* spell, then how the hell did you know she was performing it?” said Narcissa challengingly.

“Because, I’m a gifted Legilimens!” said Hannah.

“She’s right, Narcissa,” concurred Severus softly.

Narcissa shook her head in disbelief and glowered at Hannah.

“Oh, now Cissy,” said Hannah tauntingly after having leached onto Narcissa’s thoughts again. “Calling on those four burly bodyguards of yours to come and get me won’t do you any good. By the time they figure out how to open the front door, I’ll be halfway across Great Britain.”

Narcissa gaped.

Lucius chuckled and proclaimed, “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I tend to disagree with Bella. I do believe the term ‘*warrior*’ is quite befitting of Hannah.” He stepped forward and kissing Hannah’s hand, proclaimed tenderly to her, “I’m delighted you could make it.”

“Thanks for the invitation, Lucius; although I do believe I’ve received kinder welcomes from *mountain trolls*. You wouldn’t happen to be part *troll*, would you, Bella?” inquired Hannah dangerously.

Several of the death eaters sniggered.

“I *like* her!” said Fenrir Greyback in a snappy raspy tenor, motioning to Hannah.

In the background, Bella howled, finding herself, once again, smashing against the stone column after having attempted another curse on Hannah.

“I want her out of my home!” crowed Narcissa, pointing furiously to Hannah, whose wand was still raised after having delivered the second Disarming Spell to strike Bellatrix.

“Narcissa that will be quite enough,” said Lucius coolly. “If anyone should leave, it’s that wretched *hag* of a woman you call your sister.”

Narcissa’s eyes swelled with fury and she hissed out, “She’s our family, Lucius!”

“Yes, how *unfortunate* for us,” he muttered unmoved.

“I-I’m not going to stand for this!” shouted Narcissa. “Hannah, you’re to leave this instant!”

“She’s not going anywhere, Narcissa,” countered Lucius firmly. “She’s my personal guest. You and Bella will either agree to treat her with respect, or you are both to be banned from this meeting.”

Narcissa shrieked in outrage and Bellatrix nudged forward, snapping out, “Come, Cissy! Let’s go into the kitchen. I refuse to stay in the same room with Tramp Morley!”

The two began stomping off in ire.

Bella wailed as she rounded the corner, having been hit by a vicious Inferno Hex to her bum, this time compliments of Lucius Malfoy.

Everyone in the room erupted into boisterous fits of laughter.

“Come, Hannah, have a seat. I daresay I would love for you to venture here more often. Your presence would most certainly relieve me of the stresses of my daily life,” said Lucius.

Hannah smiled and settled beside Rudolphus Lestrangle, Bellatrix’s husband, who seemed more than pleased to receive her.

“Now that we’re all here,” started Lucius, “and the distractions have been so *equitably* removed,” — his eyes glinted when they settled on Hannah — “I should like for all of you to officially welcome our newest member, Hannah Morley. As many of you well know, Ms. Morley studied privately with Dumbledore and Severus Snape at Hogwarts. She was officially sorted into the Slytherin house —”

The group interrupted Lucius’s speech with loud cheers and boisterous applause.

“Yes, excellent,” said Lucius agreeably. “Ms. Morley was elected by the *Great* Dumbledore himself —” he added loosely.

A heavy chortling sound gushed from the group.

“I wholeheartedly agree with you, my friends,” continued Lucius. “As I was saying, Ms. Morley had originally been elected by Dumbledore to keep watch over young Harry Potter, to become his ‘*ghost warrior*’, if you will. She was instructed to hold his hand, walk him occasionally, burp him, perhaps; if need be,” he joked dryly.

There was a light rumble of sniggers.

“Oh, come now, Lucius,” teased Hannah. “You make it seem like I’m actually *essential* to our mission.”

Lucius winked and said, “Essential, indeed. In all seriousness, my friends, it wasn’t long before Hannah soon recognized the *waste* of a wizard that Harry Potter represents. Under Severus Snape’s charge, she learned of the glory that *true power*, Lord Voldemort’s power, has to offer us. She *willingly* and *most secretly* turned to our side to aid us in our Lord’s mission to see to Mr. Potter’s annihilation.

“She has, shall we say, filled the gap after Severus lost his post at Hogwarts last year, albeit for a most *noble* cause,” Lucius was careful to add sincerely, with a courteous bow toward Severus. “In any event, Ms. Morley’s charge is to spy on the Order, the Ministry, and Hogwarts for the Dark Lord, and to relay the information back to Severus, who, in turn, will convey any significant messages to the Dark Lord Voldemort.”

Lucius moved toward Hannah and took her hand in his, coaxing her to rise, and said further, “Now, I ask you not to be fooled by her stunning good looks and shapely feminine form. As she had so divinely illustrated for us mere moments ago, she is *quite* the *cunning* and *talented* witch. I strongly caution all of you NOT to cross her.” Then, stepping around to the far left of the group, he said, “How about we go around the room, and those of you who have not had the privilege of making Ms. Morley’s acquaintance, you can *formally* introduce yourselves.” He motioned to the two squat lumpy wizards standing to his far left and said, “Why don’t we begin here.”

“Alecto and Amycus Carrow,” said Amycus wheezily, moving forward with a lopsided leer and gesturing to himself and to his sister.

“Walden Macnair, former executioner for the Department of Ministry’s Disposal of Dangerous creatures,” said a tall lean man importantly. A notable black moustache hugged his upper lip and he wore a black eye patch over his left eye.

“Ah, yes, Macnair,” acknowledged Hannah, pondering over his prominent injury and declaring further, “Granger got you with her wand a few years back in the Department of Ministries.”

Macnair growled.

“Don’t you worry. I’ll make sure she gets her just reward,” said Hannah darkly.

Macnair’s frown curled into a relaxed grin.

“I’m Fenrir Greyback, Miss Hannah,” rasped a big, gangly man sporting a generous mane of matted grey hair and coarse straw-like whiskers. He rounded over her, reaching for her hand to impress a kiss upon it, openly salivating.

Hannah arched her brow and decreed cheekily, “Just a *kiss*, mind you, Mr. Greyback. The whole werewolf scene wouldn’t quite suit me. I have enough trouble keeping my hair combed and my legs shaved, you see.”

Fenrir chuckled, kissed her hand, and retreated.

“Avery Senior and Junior,” said an older, full-sized, sandy haired wizard, referring to himself and his son, both of whom were so large they could likely have served as the goal posts in a world cup Quidditch match.

Hannah nodded.

“Rudolphus Lestrangle,” boomed the voice of a well groomed and lightly bearded, dark-haired wizard seated beside her.

Hannah’s lips spread into a wide decadent grin as she said, “Bellatrix’s husband, I presume?”

“Please don’t hold it against me,” he answered wryly.

“I think not. Rather, I feel quite sorry for you and I marvel at your vigor. Being joined to Bella for life is a punishment that *no* man should have to shelter,” said Hannah with a teasing wink.

Rudolphus snorted in amusement.

Hannah’s eyes skipped ahead to a flaming-red-haired, heavily freckled, and long nosed wizard, whose features, to her, seemed strikingly similar to those of the Weasley family.

“Jugson,” said the man in a low and wretched voice that clashed horribly with his thin and lanky exterior.

Hannah’s attentions continued to round the semi-circle of Death Eaters. Her eyes skipped over Wormtail, offering him a delicate smile and flirty wink, which made him swoon slightly beneath his dotty grin.

“Rebastian Lestrage,” said a dark haired man in a thick, strong tenor. He looked much like Rodolphus Lestrage, only far more handsome.

“Rodolphus’s brother, correct?” said Hannah.

“Indeed, and proud supporter in your column-crushing mission to put my sister-in-law in her place,” he joked in earnest.

Hannah giggled.

“Evan Rosier, Sr.,” said an elderly wizard in a weary tenor.

Hannah’s eyes softened, her voice quieted, and in a compassionate tenor, she said, “Mad-Eye Moody killed your son.”

“Yes,” he confirmed simply. “My son died an honorable death in the name of the Dark Lord!”

Several Death Eaters in the group toasted to his words with a mellow round of calling out, “*Here, here.*”

Hannah’s eyes remained on Rosier for a long lingering stretch, almost as though she was challenging his sentiments, until she heard another voice calling out from behind her. It was that of a woman.

“I’m Yaxley, Eleanor Yaxley.”

Hannah spun around to acknowledge the thin, frail frame of a platinum blond-haired female. The woman’s eyes were a sullen shade of brown, cast beneath layers of electric blue eye shadow. Her skin was a harsh paper white, and her mouth, having been nearly non-existent, had been penciled on in blood red lip liner. To Hannah, this woman was screaming out for either a makeover, or the concealment inside the confines of a hefty paper bag.

Hannah nodded to the woman respectfully.

“Nott,” came an airy voice of a man standing next to Yaxley.

Hannah focused on the weedy-looking wizard, and she said to him, “Stunned by Hermione Granger in the Department of Ministries, Father of Theodore — a seventh year in the Slytherin house.”

Nott cleared his throat in disgruntlement over her opening comment.

“Clever boy, your son, Theodore,” declared Hannah. “I met him last year in Severus’s office after one of my lessons. As for Granger, I say she just got lucky with the shot she took at you.”

Nott seemed to relax a bit with Hannah’s compliments.

“Antonin Dolohov,” said a chestnut-haired man.

“Ah, the jet-propelled, purple-hued curse inventor. Clever spell — cast in a zigzag fashion, causes the victim internal devastation and severe pain.”

Dolohov looked impressed.

“Oh, come now, you lot,” said Hannah impishly. “Surely you didn’t think I would have shown up before a room full of my talented colleagues without doing the slightest bit of research on each one of you? After all, I need to be certain I’m able to pull my weight, the *wasted skeleton* that I am.”

The last figure to step forward and introduce himself was far more haunting than the rest.

“Mulciber,” the man introduced himself almost trivially.

Perhaps what made him so frightening was the notion that he didn’t look or sound dangerous at all. He appeared almost amusingly harmless, small, irrelevant, with no prominence or significance about his features or his character; yet his forte for cold-blooded killing was anything but trifling.

“Ah, yes,” said Hannah standing up to greet him with a most profound interest, as though she were studying some kind of rare ancient artifact. “*The Imperius Curse Specialist.*” Her concentrated enthralment seemed just shy of outright veneration. “Yes, I’ve heard you can get almost anyone to do just about anything you wish of them. I expect it comes in handy, doesn’t it? Particularly when the caster is so smooth as to bewitch the likes of the masses with such a lazy flick of the wand.”

Mulciber grinned horribly.

Hannah didn’t flinch. On the contrary, she drew nearer to him as she spoke, her voice soft and eerily steady while she worked to steal a vision of the murder of one of his victims from the depths of his mind.

“You made Emmeline Vance drown herself last summer in St. James’s Park Lake, didn’t you?” she said. “It was a dreadfully gruesome murder. You allowed her come up for air, now and again, releasing the Imperius Curse long enough to let her beg for her life and then, for her death. The more she beseeched you for your mercy, the more you deprived her of it. It pleased you to watch her suffer. It invigorated you to drain her of every drop of her essence, so ruthlessly.

“You tortured her for nearly an hour until you became bored with watching the terror looming in her eyes, until your ears and soul grew weary of housing her shrieking voice, until your hands finally numbed to the sensation of her sodden body writhing beneath the strength of your uncompromising touch. And when your senses became so blissfully overpowered by the stench of the lake mingling with her vomit and the jasmine in her perfume, you bit back your lower lip to block the roaring scream of ecstasy longing to escape you. It was only then that you finally allowed her the right to die by depriving her completely of her breath.

“I can almost taste the desperation in the salt of her tears, hear the haunting reverberations of her screams, smell the muck of the lake as it merged with her heavenly scent, and see the darkness consuming the light in her eyes as the weight of her supple body found stillness beneath you.”

Mulciber’s grin stretched until it literally took over the entire bottom half of his face. He appeared beyond pleased with himself. Hannah’s expression was stoic, unreadable. The rest of room fell jarringly silent to the point that one would likely be able hear the delicate wisp of a feather dropping.

Lucius cleared his throat, looking almost troubled by the impeccable accuracy of Hannah’s vivid account and the remarkably calm manner in which it was delivered.

“Hannah, perhaps you can fill us in on where your mission has brought you thus far,” he suggested unnervingly.

Hannah’s focus lingered over Mulciber for a moment longer. She smiled a most fearless smile before leaving his side.

“Certainly, Lucius,” she said composedly. “I haven’t much to report, since I have only *just* settled into my privileged position as Voldemort’s most lucrative spy. I *can* tell you that I have revealed Potter to be a relatively *easy* target to manipulate. A mere flash of my scantily clad skin, a friendly embrace, and a kind word of flattery is all it has taken me, thus far, to fuel his grossly swollen ego and sway him in my favor. *Honestly*, it seems as though the boy is so desperate for the love and touch of a sensual woman that with a mere wink of my eye, he practically *swoons*.”

Severus’s face grew sour. Hannah met his grimace with the attainment of a champion’s victory; it pleased her to know he was jealous over her encounters other men, and reinforced her knowledge that he truly wanted her, all of her, to himself.

“In short,” Hannah continued, “my task to woo Potter into trusting in me has been rather effortless actually, almost droll, as it lacks any real challenge, the pitiably naive wizard that he is.

“Fortunately, for him, and rather *unfortunately* for me, he has surrounded himself with more talented and overly cautious allies. Those who, for whatever reason, idolize him to

the degree they have been willing to risk their lives by surrounding him with the most outlandish means of protection and sheltering him from speaking or assuming eye contact with anyone outside the Order. Remus Lupin is the *worst* of the bunch. Ever since he assumed the post as head of the Order and became Potter's legal guardian, he's been practically breathing down Potter's neck day and night, demanding he keep his mouth shut and his mind closed to everyone, including me.

"Remus has kept an annoyingly close watch over me, as well. He seems determined to keep me tucked neatly away in his pocket, analyzing my every move. Were it not for my use of my Invisibility Potion, or giving Potter Occlumency lessons, I don't believe I'd be able to gather any useful information for the Dark Lord at all."

Fenrir stepped forward, and licking his insatiable chops, he suggested eagerly, "I could take care of Remus for you, if you'd like, Miss Black."

Hannah laughed out appreciatively, "No, no, Fenrir. You see, Remus Lupin knows far more than what he is letting on. I'm sure of it. It is my mission to find out exactly what that thing might be. With a little patience, a little time, and the use of Potter as my catalyst, I shall be certain to secure all the Dark Lord requires of me."

Just then, Narcissa came bursting into the living space, calling out to her husband alarmingly, "Lucius! The Dark Lord has sent you an urgent owl!"

Lucius stepped forward to receive a piece of red parchment and turned to Severus speaking quietly, but urgently, "Severus, might I have a word with you?"

They disappeared around the corner column and into the kitchen, leaving Hannah and the others looking curiously after them. It was several minutes before Severus and Lucius returned to the rest of the group.

"This meeting is adjourned," said Lucius evenly. "I have been called upon by the Dark Lord for an important meeting."

Severus moved to escort Hannah out of Malfoy Mansion.

"What's going on, Severus?" asked Hannah.

He ushered her from the room, into the corridor, and said softly, "The Dark Lord has requested Lucius' company. Lucius has asked me to stay on with Narcissa until his return."

"Uh! *Narcissa!-Narcissa!-Narcissa!*" hissed Hannah. "Can't that wretched woman fend for herself once in a while? You promised me we would spend the night together after our meeting here. I swear, Severus, *that woman* sees more of you than *I* do and *I'm* your *lover*; at least by name anyway. I certainly haven't been reaping any of the benefits as of late."

“Hannah.”

“*Forget it!*” she snapped, storming away from him.

“Hannah, please. Let me make it up to you,” said Snape ruefully, hurrying after her and acquiring her hand in his.

“When? The day after next, or the one subsequent to that? Or, perhaps, sometime the following week? Will you be penning me in tentatively, somewhere between Narcissa needs this and The Dark Lord needs that, provided the two don’t run together by happenstance? Or will you be fully prepared to abide by your obligations to me, your *LOVER*, the woman who is risking her life and gambling away her self-respect to see to it that *YOU* stay safe,” sneered Hannah.

“There is more at stake here than you realize, Hannah!” snapped Severus. “You cannot always be at the top of my list of priorities!”

Hannah withdrew.

“Funny. That’s not what you always promised my father...or me,” she said softly and evenly.

Severus’s upper lip twitched.

Hannah scoffed and added, “Well, at least you’re honest. Now that I know where I truly stand with you, I needn’t feel guilty if you no are longer at the top of *my* priority list. Good evening to you!” she snarled, stomping up the shallow staircase and into the foyer, the sharp clacking sound of her high-heeled boots amplifying and echoing throughout the cavernous structure of the marbled entryway as she went.

“Come back here!” hissed Severus, cleaving tightly to her arm as she reached for the handle on the front door.

“Bugger off, Severus! And don’t bother sending for me, again. I no longer work for you!” she retorted bitterly and Apparated from his sight.

Severus howled and struck the face of the front door with his fist. The loud boom reverberation resulting from the force of his punch sounded much like that of a monster canon firing off. He spun around heatedly on his heels and stormed back into the heart of Malfoy Manor.