

## A Good Prisoner

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# A Good Prisoner

by [greenflowerpot](#)

## Summary

During his brief stint as a prisoner of the Order, Draco Malfoy notices that Hermione doesn't look to be doing too well. He had always assumed that, given her brilliant mind and gentle nature, those on her side would ensure she is taken care of. Evidently not. Must he really do everything himself?

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OR: Dark Draco decides he'd rather like to keep the pretty Healer for himself, since it seems no one else can take proper care of her.

## Notes

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I sometimes post stuff about upcoming fics 💕

- Translation into Português brasileiro available: [A Good Prisoner \[tradução\]](#) by [dramionite, stargazelily](#)
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# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

In Hermione's opinion, Draco Malfoy was a very good prisoner. He was polite and well-spoken and never failed to ask how her day was, which even her fellow Order members did not bother to do.

Research took all Hermione's time these days—she surfaced from her office only for mandatory safe house duties like reinforcing the defensive wards or keeping watch on the prisoners. It was a mark of how little-attuned she was with the larger Order that she did not even know someone as high-ranking as Malfoy had been captured until she saw him herself. She just showed up for guard duty one day and it was him in the cell. He looked different than he had at Hogwarts—taller and more serious, mostly.

He greeted her calmly, like they were no more than two acquaintances running into each other. This was a welcome change from the unkindness or leering (or both) that Hermione usually endured at the hands of the other dark wizard prisoners. Unlike them, Malfoy only asked how she was and then proceeded to sit quietly in his cell, leaving Hermione in peace to look through her research notes. This endeared him to her greatly.

During her next shift, the quiet was so pleasant that Hermione—sleep-deprived as she was—dozed off. This was unusual, as she was often too fitful to fall asleep even in her own bed, but there was something calming about Malfoy's mild, detached manner. She woke with a start, disoriented and bleary-eyed, and looked up to find him watching her with faint amusement.

“Sorry,” she breathed, sitting up straighter. “Sorry.”

“I was left unsupervised,” Malfoy said. “I might have done something nefarious.”

“I know, I know. I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“May I ask why?”

“Research,” she said. “A lot of reading to do.”

He smiled a little.

“Nice to see some things never change.”

Hermione laughed, surprising herself. It was a cute remark and she liked those. But then she thought about the reasons she used to stay up: schoolwork and rule-breaking and friends. These days she was kept awake by nightmares and anxiety and panicked research on how to heal the many gruesome injuries the Order bore.

Her hands started trembling and she automatically pulled her sleeves low to cover them.

“Maybe they’ve changed just a little,” she said, looking away.

“What’s wrong with your hands?”

He was perceptive.

“Just tremors,” Hermione said after a moment. “Side effects from the research. We need better healing magic, and I have to test the experiments on myself.”

Malfoy just looked at her, not saying anything. She tugged her sleeves down again, self-conscious.

“I see,” he said finally. “And the Order permits this?”

“Well, yes. We all need to make sacrifices.”

Malfoy’s lip curled—ever so slightly—but he didn’t comment further. Hermione was grateful when he changed the topic and they spoke of Hogwarts instead.

It was too easy to become comfortable around him. Hermione was no fool; she was still the Brightest Witch of Her Age, even if these days she was also perhaps the Most Anxious and the Most Sleep-Deprived as well. She knew Malfoy was dangerous. Had he ever tried making conversation about Order business she would have shut down in an instant, never to make small talk with him again. But he never pried for information. He seemed to just enjoy conversing with her, and Hermione could understand that. She was lonely too, after all.

“How did you choose which books would go in here?” he asked one day.

Hermione looked up from her notes, brow furrowed. It took her a moment to even realize what Malfoy was talking about—the bookshelf in the cell, stocked with battered copies of novels and a few academic texts.

“Oh,” she said. “Um—I thought muggle novels might be good exposure for some of our pureblood prisoners.”

“A nice thought,” he said politely.

“Thank you,” she said, sitting up a little straighter. “And I added some Herbology and Ancient Runes texts as well. It’s important for everyone to stay sharp and improve their minds.”

“Even violent prisoners?”

“Yes. Even violent prisoners.”

“That’s very empathetic of you. Not many would feel that way.”

“Yes, well,” she said awkwardly.

Malfoy smiled a little, like he found her reaction enjoyable.

"You should read some of them," she said, putting her notes away. It had been a long time since she'd had a conversation about books with anyone. She leaned forward, examining the books next to his bed, trying to think which one to recommend.

"I have already."

"Which ones?"

"All of them."

"Really?" she asked, surprised. "I never see you reading."

"I read during the other guards' shifts," Malfoy said. "I'd rather talk when you're the one here."

There was something that felt a little too much like intimacy in his statement. Hermione cleared her throat and looked away. She was quieter for the rest of the shift, but the next time she went down for guard duty it was with three new books for him in tow.

"You're losing weight," he said, a week or so later. "Unless that's intentional, you need to eat more."

It was not intentional, and furthermore Hermione had not even been aware she was losing weight. But she looked down at her jumper—baggy, empty-looking—and found he was right.

"Oh," she said softly. "I don't have an appetite a lot of the time. Sometimes I skip meals to focus on my—"

"Research?" he supplied wryly.

"Yes," she said, defensive. "I have to. Everyone always needs better Healing charms, faster-working potions. They don't realize how much work—"

Hermione trailed off. She had never spoken outwardly about the stress of the Order's demands on her before. Her hands shook and she tucked them in her sleeves.

"The shaking is getting worse," Malfoy said after a moment. His voice was cold and a little angry, Hermione had not heard him speak like that before. "Those responsibilities shouldn't all fall on you."

She avoided his eyes.

"Well, someone needs to take care of those injured soldiers."

"And who takes care of you?"

"I don't need anyone to take care of me," Hermione snapped. The question stung for some reason. But the ire passed quickly, replaced by regret at her harsh tone. His comment had not deserved that; maybe this was why nobody wanted to talk to her.

“Sorry, that was... sorry,” she said, her tone flat. “I know that’s not what you meant.”

Malfoy seemed unperturbed by her outburst.

“It might have been,” he said. “I didn’t clarify.”

She laughed hollowly.

“Thanks, but I know what you were saying. I was just being testy for no reason.”

“What do you think I was saying?”

“What people always say. That I ought to take better care of myself.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Right,” Hermione said, waving an impatient hand. “I mean, it’s what you implied. You asked a question, ‘*and who takes care of you?*’, with an implied answer: ‘*no one, so you ought to take better care of yourself*’. You were using a rhetorical device. Hypophora, to be precise.”

He looked amused.

“Actually, hypophora is when the speaker raises a question and then explicitly answers it,” he said mildly. “Which I didn’t do. If I had, you would know that I was not, in fact, telling you to take better care of yourself.”

Hermione tried not to seem too obviously surprised that Malfoy knew what hypophora was. She was suddenly remembering that he had been at the top of their class in Hogwarts, second only after her. Although his understanding of rhetorical devices was apparently superior.

“Okay,” she said, a little petulantly. She did not like being wrong. “What were you saying then?”

He smiled.

“I meant it the way that you took offense to, actually. Namely that you do *need* someone to take care of you. You’re not good at it. You’re too prone to giving all of yourself away and too starry-eyed to realize that death by selflessness is still just death. Someone needs to take you in hand.”

Hermione stared at him. She was shocked at how frankly he shared such a strange, paternalistic stance. Separately though, she could not help but be impressed by the unexpectedly sharp edge of his intelligence, evident in every one of his clean, logical remarks. She was just rallying herself to take apart the misogynistic undertones of his definition of “take care” when he spoke again.

“To close the loop on this teaching moment, I’ll rephrase my initial question in the form of hypophora,” Malfoy said, and if Hermione didn’t know better she would have said his tone was smug. “*And who takes care of you, Hermione? I’m starting to think it should be me.*”

Her shift ended just then, saving Hermione from having to figure out how to possibly respond to *that*.

The next time she saw Malfoy he was nursing what was obviously a broken shoulder.

“What happened?” Hermione asked, rushing to the bars. She was shocked at how her voice shook—when had she become so attached?

“Interrogation day,” Malfoy said, and for some reason he looked fond and amused at the intensity of her reaction. “Run of the mill. I’ll be fine.”

But Hermione was already storming upstairs in furious search of Kingsley. She nearly kicked down the door to his office.

“Hermione?” he asked, surprised to see her. This made her bristle even further—had she really become so invisible, such a recluse?

“Why is Malfoy’s shoulder broken?” she demanded. “Is that an interrogation tactic we’re using now? Torture?”

Her hands shook and Kingsley’s eyes darted to them. But he did not ask about them—nobody in the Order ever did.

“It’s not torture,” Kingsley said, meeting her eyes again. “Just... motivation. He won’t answer our questions. What are we supposed to do?”

It was exactly the sort of mindless argument that Hermione detested. A logical fallacy—false dilemma, to be precise—but for all intents and purposes it was just weaponized ignorance.

“*You broke his bones!* Since when are we okay with that?”

“Actually, Smith broke—”

“Fallacy of accent,” Hermione snarled. “Don’t pretend you didn’t understand the important part of my sentence.”

Kingsley huffed impatiently.

“Look, I’ll let you heal him,” he said. “Will that make this go away? Is that fine?”

“Don’t hurt him again, either,” she said.

Too late she realized how it sounded. Kingsley gave her a strange look and Hermione backpedaled.

“Or any of the other prisoners. That’s not how we operate, Kingsley. Or it shouldn’t be.”

In the end, he’d agreed to it in order to get her out of his office. But not before he reminded her that Malfoy was moving to maximum security soon, to a proper prison, and that he would have to become accustomed to brutal interrogation there anyway.

The thought hung over Hermione's head as she dragged her heavy Healer's kit to Malfoy's cell. She avoided his gaze, focusing instead on transfiguring one of her hairpins into an examining table.

"Neat bit of spellwork," he complimented.

"Thank you. Take off your shirt, please. Lie down here."

He did as she asked. His shoulder looked bad.

"Hold still," she said, even though Malfoy was not moving. She was nervous but wasn't exactly sure why—she had done similar procedures hundreds of times.

Malfoy's skin was pale. With his shirt off Hermione could see that she was not the only one not eating enough; his ribs showed more than they should, and there was hardly any fat on him. She could see each of his muscles, lean and corded like a savannah predator's. She made a note to request more calorie-dense meals for him—he was tall, with a broad frame, needed more protein and fats.

"I know what you're thinking," he said, startling her from her thoughts.

"Oh?"

"You're wondering how you can possibly trust me to take care of you when I look so weak."

Hermione was shocked enough to laugh. Her plan had been to studiously, carefully, never again mention their previous conversation. The fact that Malfoy brought it up instantly—while also accurately guessing her thoughts on his lack of nourishment—was absurd and unexpectedly funny. Was Malfoy funny?

"You don't look weak," she chided. It was true that Malfoy was not frail-looking, though definitely he could use some more meat on his bones. It actually made this particular job easier, being better able to see his skeletal structure. Hermione carefully set the broken shoulder, was forced to make a small incision to remove bits of bone shard.

"Don't worry," he said, helpfully staying very still. "Once I return to my usual training regimen I'm sure my body will be much more to your liking."

Hermione laughed again, starting to suspect he was teasing her to put her at ease. She was about to say something teasing back when she heard a crumbling sort of sound from his cell. She turned in time to see a few chips of stone fall from the ceiling, revealing a small hidden compartment. Then, as though in slow motion, a single wand fell from its hiding spot.

She stared at it, frozen.

Prisoners were not supposed to have wands. Stupidly, the first thought in Hermione's mind was that whatever Order member or perhaps former homeowner had put it there had been very careless. But then she realized—obviously—that Malfoy had been the one to hide it. He was a dangerous prisoner, and he had a hidden wand.

“Hermione,” came Malfoy’s calm voice. “Don’t panic, please. It’s not good for you.”

There were many things Hermione could have done. Many things she probably should have done, all of which were more defensible than what she did. But all she could think of was Kingsley’s warning, that Malfoy would have to endure much worse than a broken shoulder when he was moved to maximum security.

She turned slowly back to the examining table, clearing her throat. He was watching her, looking not as concerned as she would have expected.

“All this old architecture,” she said, her voice unnaturally high-pitched. She tried to wave a breezy hand. “The stone crumbles constantly. That sounded like a big piece that just fell.”

It was obvious that Malfoy knew she was playing dumb. She was grateful that he did not acknowledge it, though, grateful that he allowed her to continue awkwardly avoiding his eyes as she finished putting some quick-heal serum on his shoulder and then wrapped the wound. He sat up and flexed his arm a little, humming appreciatively.

“Feels good,” he said, getting off the table. “Thank you. Sorry you had to do this.”

“It’s no problem,” she said, busying herself putting her tools away.

He watched her for a moment.

“Have you been getting more sleep?” he asked.

“Um. Not really. There’s just a lot to do, you know. And I get nightmares when I do sleep, so...”

He hummed sympathetically.

“Poor thing. It must be hard, with so many things to be frightened of.”

Maybe she was just shaken by everything, but Hermione found herself nodding. She turned to face Malfoy and saw him leisurely pick the wand up off the floor and slide it back into its hidden compartment in the ceiling, making no move to hide his action from her. Hermione looked quickly away, focused on fastening the clasps on her bag with shaking fingers.

“You wouldn’t hurt us, right?” Hermione whispered, anxiety pounding in her chest. Her hands were shaking too bad to even close her bag, but she was too preoccupied to tug her sleeves down over them. “It’s just for—just for getting out of here?”

Malfoy did not answer at first, but she heard his footsteps draw slowly closer. He did not stop until he was right next to her, close enough for her to feel the warmth of him through his clothes, close enough for her to feel his steady, calm breaths ghost over her ear. Hermione was too overwhelmed to move. He just stood there for a moment, then reached down and stroked one of her shaking hands with the back of his knuckle.

“You don’t need to worry,” he murmured gently, his voice low. “Nobody will get hurt. Least of all you. You’re mine to take care of, remember?”

Hermione laughed shakily at his reference to their little joke.

“Right,” she said. “Alright, then.”

She looked up at him—the bandage on his wounded shoulder, his eyes soft and fond. Maybe it would not be the worst thing if he escaped. He had been a good prisoner, after all. And Hermione could not condone torture, no matter the crime.

“Okay,” she said, shouldering her bag. “I suppose I’ll—I’ll see you later this week. For my next shift.”

It was a question, and Malfoy shook his head slightly. Hermione swallowed.

“Goodbye, then,” she said. To her embarrassment, she could not keep the sadness out of her voice.

Malfoy cocked his head, smiling.

“It’s just for now, sweetheart. Try not to miss me too much in the meantime.”

“Right,” she said. “Of course.”

She knew they would not meet again—wartime farewells were rarely temporary, after all. So when the alarm rang the next morning, when the safe house was put on lockdown due to the escape of their top prisoner, Hermione tried to feel relieved instead of sad that things would return to how they were before Malfoy had arrived. It had been nice having someone to talk to, but he was still dangerous, still a Death Eater. Better that he was gone now, she told herself.

In hindsight, perhaps it should have been obvious that Draco Malfoy was going to come back to fetch her. He had never been the type to leave his things behind, after all.

## Chapter End Notes

comments are my tip jar ❤

## Chapter 2

Hermione was very lonely after Malfoy's escape.

Without him at the safe house, her life was abruptly quiet once more. The absence of human connection was painfully evident, especially with her fellow Order members. It was hard not to notice that she had, at some point, become invisible to them. Just a work horse in the research lab—someone to blame when Healing potions were scarce or when injured soldiers took too long to recover.

It was not all their fault, she knew. Hermione's anxieties and traumas manifested as overwork and self-isolation. She kept to herself and shied away from seeing others whenever possible, so why should she expect anyone to care about her?

The days passed in a numb blur.

Research and experiments and safe house duties. Healing injured soldiers and ignoring the worsening tremors in her hands. Research and experiments and safe house duties...

She thought of Malfoy sometimes.

Alone and anxious as she was, remembering the pleasant hours she'd spent outside his cell was strangely soothing. Their conversations replayed in her head, his polite questions and intelligent banter and how attentive he always was to her.

Sometimes she let herself imagine that they were not so different—just two people trying to get by in a war they hadn't chosen. But she knew it wasn't true. As disconnected from the Order as she was, even Hermione knew of Malfoy's savage ascension in the Dark force ranks. His rise had been meteoric, fueled by a preternatural gift for military strategy and his famously competitive nature. It was why he had been such a prize when briefly held captive.

No, they were not really the same at all. Malfoy was thriving in the war, had taken to it like a shark to water. Meanwhile Hermione was drowning.

She tried to think of him less. Luckily, there were always more things to be stressed about, more injuries to heal and more nightmares that haunted her. Weeks passed, then a month. Hermione got better at putting him out of her mind.

So it was a surprise when she looked up from her notes one night to find that her brain had decided to supply a hallucination of him in her office.

Hermione was no stranger to seeing things on occasion—she was sleep-deprived and spent most of her time alone, after all—but Malfoy looked astonishingly real. He was leaning against a counter, watching her. She felt like she could reach out and touch the heavy black fabric of his robes.

For a moment, she just looked at him. It was nice to see him, honestly, even if it was just an illusion. He even lifted an eyebrow, like he was waiting for her to say something.

He looked a bit different from how she remembered seeing him last, and that was quite odd for a hallucination. His hair was brushed to the side, not loose as it had been when he was a prisoner, and his face looked markedly less gaunt. Hermione couldn't help but smile to herself, remembering his joke about returning to his training regimen.

Malfoy's eyes had been sharp and alert, but at her smile they softened.

"Missed me?"

Hermione froze.

His voice sounded very real.

"Don't be scared," he said, straightening up. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"You're not real," Hermione managed to say. "You're not here."

"Oh?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes. I'm just—imagining things."

He hummed, low and thoughtful.

"And... do you imagine me often?"

She did not answer.

Malfoy's robes rustled as he took a step towards her and Hermione finally unfroze, shock giving way to survival instinct.

She lunged for the nearest heavy object, a lamp on her desk, and threw it at him. Any hope she had that Malfoy was just a figment of her imagination vanished. He lifted his hand and the lamp changed course to collide with the wall. He did not even need a wand.

"There's no need to panic," he said, moving towards her. "It's only me, sweetheart."

Hermione could barely hear him through the adrenaline buzzing in her ears. Order safe houses were Unplottable, how had he found his way back?

As fondly as she sometimes thought of Malfoy, her image of him was no more than a fantasy. She knew that. In reality, he was dangerous and a Death Eater and now, terrifyingly, right here. Larger and more powerful than her, very noticeably not contained by a cell. She tried to summon her wand—it was on the other side of the room—but he caught it in one hand as it flew by him, not even slowing down in his steady pace towards her.

"What do you want from me?" Hermione asked, frantic. She tried to put more distance between them but she had backed herself against a wall. There was nowhere left to go.

Malfoy stopped right in front of her, too close for comfort. He was tall—Hermione had to tip her head back to meet his eyes.

“Scared kitten,” he murmured, lifting a hand to her chin. “No more fretting. I’ve got you now.”

She felt the jerk of Apparition around her midriff and then they were gone.

~

Hermione started running as soon as her feet made contact with solid ground.

Malfoy had brought her to a room—a bedroom, she realized with horror. There was nowhere to go, just walls and furniture and him standing between her and the door.

But there were windows.

She almost made it—Hermione leapt forward, her fingers scrabbling uselessly centimeters from the latch—before she felt the abrupt pull of levitation floating her up and bringing her back towards Malfoy.

“There’s no point in running. You won’t get far.”

“What do you want?” Hermione choked out. “Why are you doing this?”

He lowered her gently to the ground.

“I’m not going to hurt you. But if you try to escape I will just bring you back.”

“What are you talking about? Where even—is this Malfoy Manor?”

“Of course not.”

Hermione laughed—a hysterical sound. Perhaps her sanity had cracked at last.

“Oh, of course not!” she repeated. “Of course not! Because *that* would be insane!”

He smiled and for a moment Hermione thought he was going to come closer to her—her heart rate spiked—but he just slid his hands in his pockets.

“You are in unacceptably poor mental and physical condition,” he said, and Hermione flinched. “You are not valued, and you are not cared for.”

“The Order does value me,” she said. “They do care—care for me.”

“They don’t. But that’s alright. I can do a better job anyway.”

Hermione was at a loss for words.

“How altruistic,” she finally said, humiliation burning in her chest. Did Malfoy think she was so lonely and pathetic that she would believe this?

"Not entirely, I admit," Malfoy said, smiling. "Ever since I saw the condition you're in... You need someone to care for you. You need *me*. I can do it—I want to do it. There were days I could think of nothing else. The obsessive streak in my bloodline, perhaps."

"You're insane," Hermione said faintly.

"I am not typical," he conceded. "But the traits that set me apart have proven to be strengths."

"You can't just *take people* because you want to," Hermione said, shaking. "What do you want from me—gratitude? Loyalty?"

"This is not a trade," Malfoy said. He looked amused. "I wanted you for myself, so I made it so. That is all."

Hermione's hands, already trembling, spasmed from anxiety. Malfoy's eyes fell to them and his smile faded. He reached for her and she flinched back.

"Don't touch me."

"I know you don't agree with my methods," he said softly. "You don't have to. Just enjoy being cared for. Leave the burden of everything else to me."

She did not speak, just took another step away from him.

He looked at her for a long moment.

"Try to get some rest."

Then he left the room.

~

Panic and exhaustion and horrified confusion battled for prominence in Hermione's chest. She gave herself a minute to sort through them.

Malfoy was psychotic. Or manipulating her—or probably both. Was it possible he really believed a word he was saying? That he somehow thought bringing her here by force was the same thing as caring for her?

But the workings of his mind were not relevant. Hermione was no Mind Healer, and understanding his motivations would not help her. She was here now, and all that mattered was that she get out.

She checked the latches of the windows first and was disappointed but not surprised to find they did not open. She surveyed the room next, looking for other useful tools or routes of escape.

Given that Malfoy must have known she would try to leave, it was strange how little effort he seemed to have put towards removing possible weapons from the room. Surely he knew she would fight him if she had to? There was glass and crystal everywhere—the flower vase, the

lamps, the little figurines on the bookshelf—and when Hermione explored the adjoining bathroom she found perfume bottles and weighty marble containers of soaps and lotions. All of it could be broken, the sharp pieces as deadly as knives. There were even scissors in one of the drawers by the sink.

Hermione slipped the scissors into her pocket for the time being.

The door, she had assumed, would be locked like the windows—but she was wrong. The knob twisted easily in her hand and outside was a hallway.

She stepped out, wary.

Aesthetically the hallway looked similar to her room. It had high ceilings with hanging crystal lights, and there was a cream-colored rug running down the wooden floor. At the end of the hall there was a large glass door that seemed to lead to the rest of the house. The glass door was decoratively rippled and patterned with wrought iron; through the glass she could see blurred shapes, including that of a large chandelier and a staircase.

Hermione tried the door. It was locked.

Information gleaned so far: she seemed to be in a wing of Malfoy's home. She wasn't sure where this home was located—only that it looked newer and less ancestral than Malfoy Manor. Judging by the locked windows and this locked glass door, she was permitted to wander this hallway but not outdoors and not in the rest of the house.

Just then, another new piece of information made itself known: through the glass door, a silhouette of a person passed.

Hermione recoiled, surprised, but whoever it was evidently could not see her.

"Perfectly idiotic," the person said.

It was a man's voice. Not Malfoy's.

"For Merlin's sake, might we discuss anything else?" the voice of a young woman replied, sounding bored. She sounded familiar.

"How very typical of him though, isn't it?" the man asked. "Making such a fucking production of things for no reason. And for what, pray tell? A *girl*?"

"Why do you care?" the woman asked sourly. "And anyway she's not just *a girl*. She's the Golden Girl. Maybe Draco has fantasies of tarnishing her."

She giggled unpleasantly but the man did not seem amused.

"Cocky bastard. He always had to be different. Always had to have the *special* thing no one else can have. Why go through all that effort? There are plenty of girls around."

"Easier girls, you mean?" the woman asked, her voice brittle. The man did not seem to notice her tone shift.

“Exactly! Much easier. Why can’t he just—“

“You’re a fucking prick.”

The woman left, her shoes clicking angrily on the floor.

“Pansy, wait,” the man groaned. “Come on, don’t be like that, I didn’t mean you...”

He followed her, their voices getting dimmer as they took their argument elsewhere.

Hermione steadied herself against the door, feeling faint.

*Pansy?* What was she doing here?

And who had that man been? She’d thought this was Malfoy’s home—were those his guests?

By the sound of it, neither would be very inclined to help Hermione escape, given that they knew Malfoy had kidnapped her and seemed quite unbothered by it.

Well, unbothered by the ethics of it, anyway.

The fact that there were other people here changed the equation for the worse. More people meant more unfriendly eyes and ears to watch out for.

It was this thought that finally wore Hermione down.

She was exhausted—if she had to run or fight or even think effectively right now it would be a joke of a situation. She listened at the door a moment longer but, hearing nothing, finally turned back towards the bedroom.

Surely there was hope yet. Tomorrow she could get more information. By light of day she would be able to see what lay out the window, and with more rest her mind would be sharper. Perhaps she would even be able to negotiate with Malfoy for her return to the Order.

She crawled into bed and pulled the covers up to her chin, knowing sleep would not come. It almost never did, no matter how tired she was. Anxiety wracked her—not just the sharp fear brought upon by her circumstances, but also the tinny, persistent panic she carried with her always. Hermione tried to count her racing heartbeats, a calming tactic she always hoped would help but never did.

In the middle of tossing and turning, Hermione glanced at the nightstand. There was a small bottle on it—she sat up at once.

Calming Draught. She recognized the potion instantly by its distinctive purple hue and sheen. The bottle was even neatly labeled with notes on dosage and concentration.

There had never been any Calming Draught at the safe house, though Hermione had often wished for some. Brewing it required crocodile heart—an ingredient needed for too many crucial Healing potions to be wasted on something as trivial as anxiety remedies.

Hermione reached for it but then abruptly stilled.

Taking it would just be proving Malfoy right, wouldn't it? That he knew her struggles and was equipped to care for them? She slowly lowered her hand, brow furrowed.

No.

She didn't need it.

## Chapter 3

Draco Malfoy was a strategic man.

While he did sometimes do things on impulse—out of desire, out of instinct—stealing Hermione Granger was too big an action for him to take on a whim. His ambitions were vast. Malfoy's success in the Dark forces so far had come easily, but risky or high-profile maneuvers still required careful consideration and very good reason. Desire and instinct alone were not enough.

So Malfoy determined there was strategic rationale for kidnapping Hermione, a *logical* excuse for making her his.

Reputation.

Malfoy was a pureblood aristocrat turned rising star in the Death Eaters, and he knew better than most the power of notoriety. Kidnapping Hermione was a flashy move—*Draco Malfoy keeps the Golden Girl like a pet*, they would say. He would have her as his war prize, in the long tradition of powerful and brutal men. The other soldiers would have no such claim to fame.

This was a good reason for taking her. This was a strategic justification he could believe in.

Even if there were other reasons at play too.

There was something so unignorably sweet about her. Something that had lodged itself in his chest. The way she blushed, pink-cheeked and embarrassed, when he flirted with her. The way her hands shook, how lonely her eyes looked... Was nobody keeping her company, in those long, quiet hours at the safe house?

He thought of it all—constantly.

His mother would have blamed it on his ancestry, the dragon-like fixation on hoarding and control that Narcissa had always believed to be part and parcel of the Malfoy bloodline. This explanation seemed as good as any for the need Malfoy felt to keep Hermione in his house, close to him and under his care. He was familiar with being obsessive and diligent around ambition, around work—perhaps this was an extension of that same affinity for control.

He would excel here as he did in all other things. He would care for her perfectly.

Maybe Hermione would come to be grateful. Those brown eyes would certainly look pretty looking up at him, wide with gratitude.

Maybe she would even...

Desire curled, lazy and hot, in the pit of his stomach.

Malfoy drained the last of his drink, setting the cut crystal glass down too heavily on his desk. He didn't let his thoughts wander further. Hermione was just a trophy, albeit a pretty one. He would enjoy looking at her, enjoy conversing and even flirting and keeping her—sweet and well-tended—in his home. But to desire more from her would *not* be good for his reputation, would defeat the logical rationale for stealing her that he'd so carefully constructed. He was a pureblood wizard, after all. A Death Eater. Tradition demanded he find his release with pureblood women.

"*Insignus Astoria Greengrass.*"

Astoria arrived in only minutes, eager as ever for a chance to see him. Malfoy did not pursue romance, but this did not stop the pureblood women he called upon from hoping that they might charm him into making them the next Mrs. Malfoy.

Malfoy kept her turned away from him. He braced her hips against his desk and did not let himself think too deeply on why he didn't want to see her face.

He could not keep his thoughts from returning to Hermione. She was just down the hall. She was in his house. She was *his*—

He came suddenly, hard, with one hand white-knuckled on the cold mahogany of his desk. Malfoy dropped his forehead onto Astoria's shoulder, panting.

"My goodness, Draco," Astoria purred. "You must have missed me."

~

The next day, Malfoy waited until mid-morning to visit Hermione. He made sure to shower thoroughly, cleaning himself of all traces of Astoria's perfume. He didn't want to bring such unsavory things into Hermione's room.

The first thing he noticed, standing in the doorway of her room, was that Hermione had not touched her Calming Draught. The little bottle lay gleaming and unopened on the smooth, heavy wood of her nightstand.

Probably it had been too much to hope she would accept his care right off the bat.

It was clear he'd alarmed her with his arrival. Her gaze was fixed, dark and wary, on him. The dark shadows under her eyes were bruise-like in the morning light. He could tell she felt uncomfortably vulnerable like this, in bed and half under bedsheets while Malfoy stood in the doorway. It was intimate, even though she was fully clothed.

And speaking of which.

"You can change your clothes, you know," he said. "There are new things for you in the wardrobe."

Hermione's eyes darted for the barest of moments to the wardrobe before returning nervously to him.

"I have a proposition," she said, ignoring him. Her voice shook a little.

"Oh?"

He leaned against the doorframe, watching her.

She looked so tired. No doubt she'd spent all night strategizing. The need to *fix* it was intense. He could force her to have the Calming Draught, he thought. He could intimidate her into succumbing to his care this instant.

He could make her do anything. He held all the cards.

But that was not exactly how he wanted things to go.

"Tell me, then," he said softly.

She shifted a little, looking tentatively hopeful.

"I'm a good Healer," she said. "A very—a very good Healer. I'm sure your soldiers have injuries. I can take care of all of them—faster than any of the Healers on your side, I'm sure."

"And you propose to trade some amount of time of your Healing service for your freedom."

"Yes," Hermione answered, her brown eyes skating anxiously over his face. Trying to read him.

There were many things Malfoy considered saying. He could have asked her why she even wanted to go back to the safe house. Or perhaps why she thought he would kidnap her and put her in such comfortable, pretty accommodations if all he wanted from her was her Healing expertise. But he didn't.

"I'm not giving you back," he said.

Her face fell. Her hands shook and he watched as she slid them under the covers, hiding the trembling from his view.

The nerve damage was bad. Malfoy dragged his eyes back up to hers, forcing himself to look away from the evidence of her injuries. He would handle them later.

"The servants said you didn't eat your breakfast."

"As if—as if I would eat anything *you* gave me."

Exhausted though she no doubt was was, Hermione still managed to inject a good deal of acid into the remark.

Malfoy smiled.

"Do you think I've put something in it?" he asked, straightening up and walking to her bedside.

Hermione froze, but he only reached for the untouched breakfast tray on the nightstand. He picked up a blackberry and, meeting her eyes, popped it in his mouth. The juice was sweet.

"It's safe to eat, and you're malnourished," he said. "Come and have your breakfast, kitten."

"No."

Her voice shook. Her eyes were defiant and more than a little angry.

"Come and have your breakfast, and I'll show you the outside of the house," Malfoy said quietly.

Hermione shifted again, and her eyes darted to the window.

It was too good an offer for her to ignore, as Malfoy had known it would be. No doubt she had seen the view of the gardens, the paths leading off in every direction. No doubt she had wondered if she might take one of them to escape the property.

She tried to feign indifference, and perhaps if she was not so exhausted and depleted it might have been convincing.

"Cast a tamper detection spell on the food," she said finally.

Malfoy smiled, then did as she asked.

Half an hour later and he was leading her through the West gardens.

Hermione seemed overwhelmed by it, kept blinking dazedly in the sunlight. The Order was losing the war and had been forced into hiding—Malfoy wondered if it had been a long time since she had been outdoors.

He kept a slow, steady pace so it would be easier for her to take everything in. He remembered what it was like to see a garden for the first time after Azkaban.

His girl was not the most subtle of masterminds. She kept testing the soles of her new shoes against the gravel paths and Malfoy hid a smile. If any of his soldiers behaved with such lack of subtlety in a captive situation he would have been furious. It was obvious Hermione was hoping to get away on foot, was probably in disbelief at how foolish Malfoy must be to give her new footwear.

She'd refused to wear any of the new clothes in her wardrobe but he'd convinced her on the shoes. They were white trainers, the laces pale pink. They looked very sweet on her.

"I feel like it would be unfair of me to not give you warning," Malfoy said lightly, looking up at the trees. "If you try to run away, I will be forced to keep you on a tighter leash when I catch you."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means I am being quite lax with you at the moment, out of hope you will realize on your own that I intend to give you an easy, happy life here. But if you are stubborn I may need to take a firmer hand."

He knew she was hardly listening. He could tell from the way she lingered behind him, trying to memorize each turn of the path they took.

Ah well. Perhaps it was just a lesson she'd have to learn in practice.

~

Her first escape attempt was later that day. The clumsiness of the effort was testament to how badly she needed rest and nourishment.

After the garden tour, Hermione had asked him to open the windows in her room, giving a feeble excuse for wanting fresh air.

"If you help me unlatch the windows, I'll wear something from the wardrobe," she wheedled.

He had been planning on agreeing anyway, just to see this thing through. It was an added bonus that she was starting to negotiate with him, was astute enough to know that the promise of seeing her in clothing he'd bought was an enticing one.

She donned a pale blue jumper and Malfoy let himself drink in the sight of it.

Later, after he caught her, he even got to feel it.

The fabric was soft and woolen under his grip, warm from the heat of her body. Though with how much she was thrashing there were more immediate things to pay attention to as he carried her back to the house.

"Let me go!" she screeched, clawing at his back.

One of her flailing kicks—surprisingly strong—connected with Malfoy's ribs and he grunted before adjusting his grip around her. She reared back, seemed to be preparing to slam her head into his face, and Malfoy held the back of her neck.

"Stop," he said, bringing his face close to hers. "Enough now."

She wrenched away, then bit him.

It was hard enough to break skin.

The pain did not faze him, but Hermione's warm little mouth was on his neck, and that was certainly something. Malfoy kept his eyes resolutely ahead, did not let himself react even as he felt a trickle of blood soak into his collar.

Perhaps this lack of response was what finally broke her. Hermione went limp, shaking from exertion. She squirmed away from the blood she'd drawn from his neck, whimpering, and Malfoy loosened his hold a little. He still kept a relaxed grip on the back of her neck.

"I know," Malfoy murmured, dragging his thumb across her bottom lip, wiping the blood away. "Overwhelming, hm? I know."

Her cheeks were a perfect pink, streaked with angry tears. This contact—her body, tangled up in his arms like caught prey—was intoxicating.

He tucked her face against his neck again—the left side, where there was no blood—and this time Hermione did not fight him.

They made it back to the house and Malfoy walked past her room without entering. He felt her stiffen in surprise, even more so when he waved a hand over a blank stretch of the hallway and a new door appeared. He carried her in, ignoring the weak movements she made to break out of his arms when she saw it was a different bedroom.

His bedroom.

"Shh," he soothed. "I'm not going to hurt you."

He dropped her so she was seated on his bed, then crouched on the ground before her to examine the cuts on her legs and hands.

"Why can't we go to my room?" she asked, voice high.

"I told you I would keep you on a tighter leash if you ran. We're in my room now, for the evening. It's not as pretty as yours, is it?"

She squirmed away, making a whining noise, but Malfoy just caught her by the wrists.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he repeated, low and soft. "Just be good."

He summoned some Healing supplies and started working at cleaning and treating some of the deeper cuts in her skin. She had made it almost to the river, had been shin-deep in a thorny hedge when he caught her.

"If you'd changed into some of the new trousers in your wardrobe, you would have had better leg protection," he noted softly. "These old ones are just about torn to pieces."

He shifted some of the ripped fabric to the side to clean more of the wounds. He reached a particularly deep one on her knee and she tensed with pain.

"Poor thing," he hummed, smoothing a calming hand over her leg.

They remained like that in silence for a bit. Hermione's clothes were muddy and she was smearing dirt on the duvet of his bed, but Malfoy barely noticed. Finally, when the majority of her injuries were cleaned and sorted, he stood.

"Go take a bath," he said quietly, wiping his hands with a cloth.

Hermione nodded, swallowing. It seemed the tumult of the afternoon had shocked her into obedience. She stood unsteadily and started making her way to leave the room but Malfoy

caught her by the wrist.

“Not back in your room,” he said. “Here.”

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Here?*

Hermione tried to tug her hand back but Malfoy did not let her go.

“You need a Dittany bath for those cuts,” he said. “It will help with the nerve damage in your hands too.”

“It’s fine,” she said.

“It’s not. Do as I say, please.”

“I’m not taking a bath in front of you,” Hermione said, her voice tight with fear. “I’m not—I’m not doing things like that.”

“Things like that?” Malfoy repeated mildly.

Hermione didn’t answer. Her eyes darted to his bedroom door. If only it was open, she could run down the hall...

And go nowhere.

The futility of it all crashed down on her. There was no escape—she’d just seen for herself how large the grounds were. She’d gone west and had run for nearly half an hour before she even hit the muddy riverbanks, the thorny hedges, the dense magical wards. And Malfoy would find her anyway. He would drag her back just like he’d done right now, was stronger and faster and more brutal than her—Hermione was just a Healer, how could she hope to escape a soldier?

“I didn’t bring you here to hurt you,” Malfoy said, interrupting her thoughts. “You needn’t be so afraid.”

“I don’t—“

He stepped close to her, his voice low and soft.

“You can keep your clothes on if you like,” he said. “Just get in the tub.”

When Hermione didn’t move he clicked his tongue. Suddenly she was in the air, being levitated across his large, sparse bedroom through the door to the bathroom.

“Stop!” she screamed. “Don’t—”

Hermione tried to kick out but her legs would not move—her arms, too, were frozen at her sides. Her words died in her throat, choked by panic.

Malfoy floated her into the empty tub. Once she was in, her arms and legs could move freely again. Hermione scrambled back as soon as she could move; she made one meager attempt to climb out of the tub but Malfoy just caught her arm and nudged her gently back.

She drew her knees up tight to her chest, shaking.

The bathroom was made mostly of smooth white marble. Large and sparse, just like Malfoy's bedroom. This was not a man that dealt with many frivolities, and Hermione wondered not for the first time what on Earth such a cold, practical person was doing spending his time acclimating her to his home.

He stood over her, looking down with tenderness in his serious grey eyes. Under his intent gaze, in her torn and muddy clothes, Hermione felt as vulnerable as a frog on a dissection tray.

"Very sweet," he said, low and affectionate. He brushed his fingers against her cheek, then her hair. His touch moved gently—almost absently—through her curls. Hermione was too frightened to move.

"I know you're scared. There's nothing to be frightened of. Not with me."

The touch of his hand was slow and soothing.

"Your clothes are muddy," he continued softly, still playing with her hair. "Did you know you got it all over my bed? I'm going to transfigure them into something clean so your bath water won't get dirty."

He did not lift a finger but suddenly Hermione's jeans and muddy jumper fluttered as though in a strong breeze. When the fabric settled she was wearing clean, dark pajamas. There had been some smudges of dirt on her arms and legs but those were gone now too. Hermione shivered harder at his casual display of wandless magic.

Malfoy turned the water on.

She recoiled from the faucet instinctively, both at the sudden loud noise and the muscle memory of avoiding streams of water while fully dressed, but Malfoy placed his hand gently on the back of her neck, stilling her.

It was odd and difficult to remain still as water filled the tub around her, soaking the pajamas she wore.

But the water was the perfect temperature, and Malfoy's fingers raked gently through her hair again, easing patiently through the tangled parts.

To Hermione's humiliation, she found herself deriving some comfort from his steady, possessive touch. It had been a long time since anyone had physically soothed her.

She closed her eyes, feeling pathetic.

There was some sort of lavender scented soap in the tub by then and the soft steam from the water filled the room with the scent of flowers.

“*Accio Dittany.*”

Hermione opened her eyes to watch Malfoy pour a stream of the pale oil into the bathwater. There was calm concentration on his features and she was reminded of him in Potions class back at Hogwarts.

He emptied half a vial of the Dittany and then set the remainder to the side.

“Ten minutes of soaking,” he said. “I’ll wait here with you. Try to keep your shoulders submerged.”

“Thirteen minutes is the generally accepted medicinal soak duration...”

“Thirteen, then,” Malfoy said.

She shifted downwards until the water was at her collarbone.

“Good.”

It was silent for a while after that. Hermione was still scrunched up small—her knees drawn up, her arms tight—but as minutes ticked on her limbs started to relax. The joints in her fingers felt less pained than they had in months.

Malfoy’s hand returned to her hair. As water seeped up the strands he shifted the curls to one side, gathering them so they didn’t stick to her neck.

“I love having you here,” he said softly.

Hermione squeezed her eyes closed and she heard him laugh.

“You missed me too, I think,” Malfoy said.

“I didn’t,” she said at once, too fast. “You’re delusional.”

He tugged gently on a curl in soft reprimand.

“Bad liar.”

“If I did miss you, I assure you it was only before I realized the extent of your insanity,” Hermione snapped, cheeks heating.

“You bring up my sanity often. Do I seem so unstable to you?”

He didn’t. His hand was loving and steady in her hair.

“Kidnapping someone isn’t exactly considered a stable thing to do,” Hermione managed to say, her voice cracking.

“I don’t concern myself with what others consider.”

“Spoken like a true pureblood.”

He smiled at her.

“Well I can’t change what I am, can I?”

“Right,” Hermione said after a moment. She was remembering all too well how unchangeable Malfoy considered blood status to be. “I’m surprised you’re even touching me. Won’t your pureblood hands get dirty?”

Malfoy’s touch stilled.

For a moment Hermione was worried she had made a mistake. Her throat went dry.

“My hands can only get cleaner touching you,” he said finally.

He combed his fingers fondly through her hair again. Then his hand found the nape of her neck and his thumb stroked gently along the line of tense muscle.

“My lovely, clean thing, hm? Pure and good. Not like me.”

Hermione remained silent, brow furrowed with confusion.

“Thirteen minutes done,” Malfoy said a few moments later. He straightened up. “Good job, kitten.”

Malfoy offered her a hand and Hermione took it without thinking, staggering a little under the weight of her soaked pajamas. She heard him murmur a spell and the water in the tub disappeared—another spell dried her clothes. The scent of lavender and an herbaceous hint of Dittany lingered on the fabric.

“A Dittany bath every two days, understand? There’s a case of the oil in your bathroom already.”

“I don’t—have to do it with you every time?” Hermione asked.

Malfoy smiled lazily.

“No. Just when I miss you.”

Hermione turned red again and looked away.

“Your hands seem to be doing better,” Malfoy noted. “Let me see.”

He reached for her, catching her fingers, and Hermione did not stop him.

Malfoy's hand was much larger than hers, the skin rougher. He held her fingers delicately in his palm, smoothing his thumb over the fine bones of her knuckles.

"Very pretty," he murmured.

His touch on her hand grew a little broader, like he wanted to cover more of her skin. He stroked her wrist, each of her fingers.

Suddenly, as though on impulse, Malfoy lowered his head and pressed his mouth firmly to the center of her palm.

Hermione froze. The kiss was long, his mouth hot on the soft skin of her hand.

Malfoy finally lifted his head to look at her, a strand of pale blond hair falling into his face. The effect was unexpectedly boyish. She could feel his breath, a little unsteady, on her hand.

He seemed to be looking intently for any sign of either rejection or approval but Hermione did not move and he lowered his head again. Another kiss to her hand, harder and greedier this time. He breathed deeply in, like he wanted not just the feel of her skin but the smell of it too.

Malfoy made a low noise of pleasure at the contact and the sound jolted something in Hermione into awareness.

*Why was she letting him do this? What was wrong with her?*

Hermione jerked her hand away, shame flooding her. Malfoy's grey eyes were dark and half-lidded, his lips slightly parted. He looked almost drunk.

"Come back—" he murmured, reaching for her again.

Some strange, unwelcome part of Hermione wanted him to kiss her hand again. The shame of her own reaction burned in her throat.

Without thinking, knowing only that she needed to put a stop to this situation before it spiraled out of her control, Hermione drew her hand back and slapped Malfoy across the face.

The sound was like the crack of a whip in the silence of the bathroom.

She had, in her panic, hit him rather hard—hard enough for her hand to instantly start stinging with pain, hard enough to turn his face to the side.

Hermione shook with adrenaline. In front of her, Malfoy was facing away, his breathing still heavy.

She could not make herself stay to find out what happened next.

She ran.

Out the bathroom, through his bedroom—the door leading into the hall had been locked earlier, she was almost sure of it, but when she twisted the handle it opened without resistance. She nearly fell over her feet running down the long, lovely hall, nearly fell again stumbling over the threshold of her bedroom.

Hermione slammed the door behind her and pressed her back to it, her breathing fast and frantic. Gasping, she closed her eyes and pushed the heels of her hands against the sockets, trying to regain control of herself.

Her hands smelled like lavender and Dittany. Her left palm sang sweetly with the memory of Malfoy's mouth.

~

The next morning, Hermione rose early. She needed to escape. Things were unraveling in her mind, everything confusing and so destabilizing.

Her plan was to use the morning to search all through the hallway—the little bit of the house she had access to—for anything that might help her make her way back to the Order.

The thought of seeing Malfoy after the previous night made Hermione's stomach twist. She listened through her bedroom door for his footsteps, making sure he was not outside, before quietly opening it and stepping out into the hall.

She glanced automatically at both sides of the hallway then froze. She did a double take to the left.

The glass and wrought iron door to the rest of the house was no longer closed.

Hermione crept forward, wary but too curious to stop herself. Surely this had to be a trap?

The previously locked hallway now spilled directly into what appeared to be the formal living room of Malfoy's home. She walked out of the hall, head twisting to examine the newly revealed addition to her known universe.

It was brighter out here—there were windows everywhere. Like everything else she had seen of the home, Malfoy's living area was lavish and large. Airy and high-ceilinged, all pale walls and dark accents. Hermione stepped under the chandelier she had only seen the blurry outline of before, cast her eyes over the grand sweep of the staircase.

Her palms were sweaty. She wiped them on the side of her pajama trousers.

There was no sign of anyone. Not Malfoy, not Pansy, and not any mystery Slytherin man that might have been the faceless voice Hermione had heard Pansy speaking to.

To her left there was a huge wall of windows, and the light pouring in was still cold and bright with pale morning sun. It was very early. Maybe nobody was up yet?

Hermione took a long breath. She might only have a small window of time unsupervised. It felt like a trap, but what if this was her only chance?

She began searching.

She was looking for a wand, or Floo powder, or maybe a ring of keys—anything that might help her in her efforts to make it out of here. As she searched, she tried also to keep an eye out for information on the Death Eaters. She may as well return to the safe house with something that might help the Order win the war.

There were a few decorative alcoves in the living room but Hermione found nothing useful in them. Just art—carved stone sculptures, an ivory and obsidian vase, bright, sharp arrangements of glass flowers. Closer to the staircase she found bookshelves as well.

Presumably, the upstairs were where Malfoy's non-imprisoned guests lived—having no desire to stumble upon Pansy Parkinson, Hermione did not set foot on the grand staircase. But she did take the time to carefully examine the nearby bookshelves. They were tall and stocked full of unexpectedly intriguing titles, mostly novels and books of poetry.

No wands. No stacks of military strategy papers. She kept looking.

On the other side of the staircase Hermione found a large fireplace. It was as tall as a man—perfect for Floo travel. She paced slowly in front of it, then peered up into the dark heights of the chimney. Perhaps Malfoy would have hidden the Floo powder in here—?

“You don’t think he’s going to let you run away that easily, do you?”

Hermione whipped around so fast that she nearly cracked her head on the brick of the chimney.

A man was standing behind her. Where had he come from?

Hermione turned to face him more fully. She did not like the idea of showing her back to him.

The man looked to have just been having breakfast or morning tea. There was a porcelain teacup in his hand, and he was wearing expensive-looking pajamas.

“Who are you?” Hermione asked.

His eyebrows raised. They were dark, as were his hair and his eyes. Eyes that were presently examining Hermione with a mixture of curiosity and—something else.

“Theodore,” he said. “Nott. Was I so unmemorable in school?”

Slytherin. Malfoy’s year. Pansy’s year. This was the mystery man.

“I remember you now,” Hermione said. “You look—different.”

He had been weedy and a bit small at Hogwarts, but he towered over her now. A late bloomer.

"You look a bit different too," Nott said, cocking his head to the side. "Though I suppose being on the losing side of a war will do that to you."

Hermione stiffened.

"Still cute," he said, smiling. "Don't worry."

"Thank goodness I can stop worrying," Hermione bit off.

Nott smiled wider. His aristocratic features—the dark hair contrasted with pale skin—were cold and refined; he reminded Hermione of one of those oil paintings of heirs gone by that hung in old pureblood homes.

"Do you live here?" Hermione asked after a pause.

"At the moment," he answered. "As do you, it seems. And where is Draco keeping you?"

Hermione didn't answer and Nott lifted his eyebrows again.

"In his bedroom, perhaps?"

"No," she snapped, humiliated. "I have my own room."

"Of course," he demurred. "Silly of me."

He took a casual step closer to her. Hermione was very aware of the fireplace at her back.

"You certainly are a fetching thing," he said thoughtfully, examining her. "Why is he letting you wander around so freely? I thought he'd keep you all to himself."

"Do you know what he wants me here for?" Hermione asked suddenly. "Is this—a Death Eater plan?"

Nott shrugged.

"I don't think anyone but the people in this house know you're here," he said. "Though it's probably just a matter of time. I expect Malfoy took you for the same reasons he does anything—to show that he's better than everyone."

Nott's expression flashed dark and bitter for a moment, but then his face smoothed. He smiled.

"I'm sure you're hungry," he said. "Why don't you come have a bite to eat with me? It's terribly boring around here... I could use a diversion."

Chapter End Notes

sort of elements of dubious consent here (not sexual - yet?) - he is a kidnapper after all.

Thanks for reading and waiting so patiently <3 I love writing for you

## Chapter 5

Hermione agreed to breakfast, though it made her uneasy to do so. She was in no position to turn down a potential ally, even if Nott's friendliness was unsettling.

He suggested they eat out in the courtyard. She was still not used to being outside—Hermione's time in hiding with the Order had required remaining inside the safe house day in and day out. Being able to enjoy the fresh air, out under the open sky, was amazing. And Malfoy's grounds were exceptionally lovely. This courtyard in particular was spacious and seemed overly large for a private home, with plentiful outdoor seating laid out on the moss-lined stone floors and tall, leafy hedges on all sides. The hedges were interrupted at intervals by wide, manicured walking paths.

It was cold out, the morning very young. Nott conjured a plate of pastries on one of the delicately wrought bronze tables. Another flick of his wand and a teapot appeared as well. Steam from the spout bloomed, thick and white.

He poured her a cup.

"Draco seems to be handling you very gently," he said. "How fortunate for you. Most prisoners get the dungeons."

"Yes, well. No less a prisoner, unfortunately."

"Of course. The virtuous Golden Girl... I'm sure you're in a rush to return back to your precious Order."

He passed her the tea then began spooning honey into his own cup.

Hermione took the opportunity to—as surreptitiously as she could—better examine her surroundings. She hadn't seen this part of the grounds in the previous day's escape attempt. It might be useful to know more of the layout.

"Curious about something?" came Nott's voice, interrupting her thoughts.

Hermione's eyes snapped to him.

"No," she said.

Nott rolled his eyes. He flicked his wand and a shimmering blue bubble settled around them. Hermione recognized it as a sort of privacy charm, similar but a bit more complex than the kind designed to thwart eavesdroppers.

"You're looking around, searching for information. You could just ask me—I know more than you do."

She stared at him.

"You think Malfoy wouldn't be able to hear us through a Muffliato?" she asked.

Nott snorted.

"I've been here long enough to know how to not put myself at risk," he said. "You can speak plainly or I can dismiss the charm and we can go back to smalltalk. Your choice."

Hermione's mind whirred, trying to integrate these new bits of context.

Nott was not loyal to Malfoy. Or, at least, that's what he wanted her to think.

"Fine." Hermione's palms were sweating; she wiped them on her pajama bottoms. "Okay. I was looking at those paths over there—where do they go?"

Nott glanced at the paths.

"Rose gardens, kitchen side entrance, Quidditch pitch," he said, gesturing to each in turn.

It was a real answer, or at least sounded like one.

"And—what sort of land features are around the estate?" she asked. "Outside of the grounds, I mean."

"There's a river to the west. Mountains north and east of us. A forest to the south."

"Are the mountains... traversable by foot? The forest?"

"Do I look like I hike?" Nott asked with a snort. "I'm not sure. Maybe a few kilometers of woods—the mountains are bigger."

"What about roads? Are there any nearby?"

"Draco maintains a handful from the grounds to the surrounding areas. But they're all heavily warded."

Hermione's nails bit into her palm. She sat forward.

"How could I get out of here?"

Nott smiled at her.

He leaned back in his seat.

"Good question," he said musingly. "An answer to that would be *quite* the favor, don't you think?"

Hermione felt suddenly like a rabbit that had been following a trail of food only to find itself within reach of the hunter.

"What do you want from me?" she asked. "I can't pay you. I don't even have my wand."

Nott's eyes were shrewd now.

"Luckily I don't want money or your wand," he said. "But you do have something I'm looking for—something you seem uniquely able to deliver. Draco is keeping you in his private wing. Rather intimate, don't you think?"

Hermione's shoulders stiffened.

"I'm not suggesting anything," Nott continued mildly. "Other than that he seems to have a remarkable soft spot for you."

"He kidnapped me."

"A show of fondness, in his own way, no?"

"What are you getting at?"

"That there are worse things than having the affection of Draco Malfoy. He's become very powerful, in case you hadn't noticed. Maybe he likes you enough to do as you ask, for instance."

These were rather more dangerous waters than Hermione had bargained for.

"I don't know," she muttered, twisting the napkin in her lap. "I'm not sure if I can—"

"Unless, of course," Nott interrupted, smiling at her. "You think you can escape without any help."

The words hung in the air.

"What would you want me to have him do?" Hermione finally asked.

He hummed noncommittally.

"That's getting ahead of ourselves. I'm sure we'll speak again. Just think about it for now—it never hurts to have options."

He wiped his mouth and stood before she had the chance to speak again.

"Thank you for the delightful company," he said with a sardonic little smile.

The blue privacy bubble around Hermione popped as he walked away, the magic dissipating quietly into mist.

~

Hermione continued searching the house after breakfast, but it felt pointless. She'd found nothing useful. It was obvious that her best bet at a successful escape was Nott.

His words echoed in her head.

Hermione knew Malfoy had some strange, dark fondness for her. She remembered all too well the hungry look in his steely eyes when he'd sat over her, stroking her hair while she soaked in the tub. That *noise* he'd made when he pressed her palm to his mouth...

A now-familiar blend of panic and confusion twisted in her stomach at the recollections.

But—Hermione thought, tearing her mind away from those memories—how was she supposed to twist that strange obsession into something more strategically useful? She was not built for subterfuge—had always been a bad liar, had always worn her heart on her sleeve. It felt impossible that someone like Malfoy would not instantly see through any attempts she might make to manipulate him.

She paced the tall, silent halls of Malfoy's home, miserable and anxious.

Hermione was just about to call it quits for the day when she heard Malfoy's voice.

She had not run into him all morning, and the sound made her shoulders tense. It seemed to be coming from a room near the grand entryway, where the staircase spiraled. The room had been closed when Hermione passed through earlier in the morning but now the wooden double doors stood ajar.

Hermione took a quiet step closer and tried to listen in.

“—in Surrey,” came Malfoy's cold voice, finishing a sentence that Hermione had not heard the first part of. “Without mistakes this time.”

“Understood,” came a man's answering voice. There was a slight, flickering distortion to the sound that Hermione recognized as Floo fire. “And then there's the Wales update—”

“Hold on,” Malfoy interrupted.

Hermione frowned. What was he doing? She inched closer.

A levitation charm seized her suddenly about the waist. Hermione choked back a scream, kicking out futilely as the magic lifted her into the air and carried her easily through the double doors.

A wide polished desk came into view first, flanked by tall windows through which streamed the warm light of late morning. Then the fireplace, where green flames burned. Malfoy was standing in front of the fire, his tall, lean frame silhouetted against the Floo. His head was turned to watch her.

This was his office. The room was large in a way that made Hermione feel small and undefended on all sides. She stopped kicking, shrinking in on herself instead.

“We're done for today,” Malfoy said shortly, still looking at her. “We'll cover the rest later.”

“Of course, sir.”

The green flames disappeared with a snap.

The charm released Hermione. She swayed on her feet, regaining her balance and fighting the urge to run back out the door, an urge only exacerbated when Malfoy slid his hands into his pockets and walked towards her, his strides long and slow.

To her relief, he stopped a few paces from her. His eyes flicked down to observe her hands—they were not shaking as bad as usual and he seemed satisfied with this. His gaze returned to her eyes.

Hermione's heart rate quickened. Was he angry at her for hitting him?

But Malfoy didn't seem angry. And when he spoke his voice was not cold and brusque as it had been to the man in the Floo.

His tone was gentle with her, as always.

"Are you enjoying exploring the house?" he asked politely.

He folded his hands behind his back—as though to show her he would not reach for her.

"Yes," Hermione answered after a moment. Then, feeling stupid, she nervously clarified: "I mean. Enjoying is not the most precise term. Obviously. But I suppose—as a sort of colloquial shorthand..."

She trailed off awkwardly.

It was too much to maintain eye contact with him so Hermione looked instead at the rest of his office. The room was so large. At the center was his polished desk, and behind that was a foreboding, tall-backed leather chair. One side of the room held a sort of sitting area and the other side seemed to be a personal library. There were many well-stocked shelves, tall and gleaming. Hermione tried to peer at their contents.

"Look at me, please," came Malfoy's calm voice.

Her eyes flew automatically back to his.

"Thank you," he said.

Malfoy tipped his head to the side, examining her through unreadable grey eyes.

"You slapped me last night."

Hermione's shoulders stiffened.

"Yes," she said. "Because you—you—"

"It's alright," he said quietly. "It was right of you to stop me. I was making a mistake."

Shame curled in her stomach. She could not help but dwell on how long it had taken her to stop him.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you," he said.

"I'm not frightened," she lied.

Malfoy smiled at that.

"Brave girl."

Hermione's cheeks heated with embarrassment.

He turned away then, moving to his desk.

"Stay with me a while," he said. "Please. I'll keep my mouth away from you this time."

There were two stiff-backed chairs across from Malfoy's desk and Hermione, after a moment's hesitation, approached them.

"Not there," Malfoy said.

He inclined his head towards a spot next to his chair, on his side of the desk.

There was a chaise there, upholstered in green fabric and fashionably low-seated.

Hermione stepped obediently around the desk and perched on the edge of the green chaise. It was softer than it looked—she sank a little into the surface and shifted for balance.

Malfoy turned his own chair to face her. His seat was taller than hers and he leaned down so their eyes were at the same level, his elbows resting on his thighs.

"I've got two more hours of work," he said. He tapped one long finger on his desk and an hourglass appeared there, in view of Hermione. The sand began to trickle. Malfoy returned his gaze to Hermione. "Then I'm all done for the day. We can do whatever you like after, alright?"

"Okay," Hermione said. She wasn't sure why he wanted her here. "And what should I do for two hours?"

His gaze moved to the towering bookshelves in the office, extending from polished wood floors to vaulted ceiling. He looked back at her.

"I have a feeling you'll like some of the books in here. Why don't you take a look? I'll have tea brought in for you."

With that, Malfoy turned back to his desk. His expression had been soft when directed at Hermione but it hardened as he refocused on the papers upon his desk. He dragged one of the pieces of parchment closer to him with his fingertips and started marking notes on it.

For some reason she had never considered that the military strategy part of Malfoy's role might involve paperwork.

She stood after a moment, making her way over to his bookshelves.

Perhaps this was not a bad turn of events. Certainly she would be better equipped to learn valuable information that might help the Order here in Malfoy's office, right?

And, she thought, remembering Nott's words to her, maybe it was good that she was spending time around Malfoy. Just to get a better read on the situation.

Hermione examined the row of leather spines on the shelf closest to her. Her eyes widened and she peered closer.

There were exceedingly rare titles here, the sort of books only museums—or ancient, wealthy pureblood families—could hope to own. She pulled a dark red tome from the shelf, her lips parting in surprise when she saw that it was an extended edition of her favorite book on Ancient Runes. Hermione tucked it under her arm and hurriedly pulled another book off the shelf—an unpublished volume of philosophy essays by Morgan le Fay.

Some distant, tucked away corner of Hermione's heart pattered eagerly to life. There had not been much time for leisurely reading back in the safe house, and it had been years since she'd gotten her hands on new books.

She returned to her seat only when her arms could carry no more heavy volumes. She sank into the chaise with a muffled thump and immediately pulled open the top book—a text as thick as her thigh. The comforting smell of old pages surrounded her and she breathed deeply in.

There was nothing else to do now anyway, right? Malfoy had asked she remain here while he worked. And it would be a crime to not at least glance through some of these incredible titles...

*Chapter One: Runes and Their Role in Reunification...*

*Chapter Two: Symbols - A History...*

*Chapter Fourteen: Applications of Curse Research on Translations...*

Hermione had burned through three quarters of the textbook when she blinked blearily and realized the sun out the window was no longer high and bright in the sky.

She looked up to see Malfoy watching her. He was leaned back in his chair, his long legs stretched before him and crossed at the ankle. He looked tired but relaxed, like he'd finished working a while ago. His grey eyes were lazily half-lidded as they observed her.

He smiled a little when their eyes met.

The hourglass on his desk was empty.

“What time is it?” Hermione asked. Her voice was hoarse from disuse.

Malfoy glanced down at his wristwatch. A few strands of blond fell forward, looser and less sleek than usual, presumably from having his fingers run through it a few times over the course of the afternoon. The sleeves of his shirt were pushed back and the top button of his collar was undone.

"Half past five," he said, then looked back up at her.

"Did you—did you finish your work?"

"I did."

Hermione looked down at the book to take note of what page she was on before awkwardly closing it and placing it on the chaise next to her. She smoothed the front of her pajama trousers, where the heavy tome had pressed creases into the fabric. She realized with mild embarrassment she had never changed out of her sleep clothes.

"Um," she said. "What do you want to do now?"

There was a knock at the office door before he could answer.

Malfoy glanced up absently, seemingly unbothered.

"Come back later," he said.

"Master Malfoy," came a house elf's squeaky voice through the door. "The dinner tonight, sir. Masters Mulciber and Dolohov have arrived and the others will be here soon."

Hermione had been staring at the door, alarmed by the sudden intrusion, and now she darted a look at Malfoy.

Judging by Malfoy's reaction, he seemed to have forgotten about this particular commitment. He grimaced, rubbing his jaw.

"Fine," he called back, sounding irritated. "Thank you. I'll be out in a moment."

"Master Malfoy," the house elf squeaked again. "For Miss Granger..? Did you wish for me to prepare her?"

Hermione's eyes widened in alarm. *Prepare her?* What did that mean?

Malfoy snorted softly at the look on her face.

"Your clothes," he said quietly, wrinkling his nose at her. "For the dinner. Don't look so terrified."

He examined her for a moment longer, his grey eyes soft and thoughtful. His gaze flitted to the books by her side, and to the way she was curled on the green chaise. His finger tapped once, twice, on the polished wood of his desk.

“No,” he called back finally, looking up at the door to his study. “No need. Let's not show Miss Granger off just yet.”

He stood up then, straightening his sleeves and smoothing his hair to the side.

“Why rush, hm?” he asked softly, doing up the top button of his collar. “I think there's no harm in keeping you to myself just a little longer.”

## Chapter 6

Hermione wanted to ask why Malfoy no longer wanted his Death Eater friends to see her—or, for that matter, why he had wanted them to see her in the first place. But she wasn't sure he would give her an answer. It wasn't clear to her what he would or would not indulge her on.

Anyway, he was looking serious and business-like now. His grey eyes were cold as he cast a few quick spells around the office, presumably securing things that he did not want her finding.

Hermione's stomach gurgled. She had not had felt hungry in what felt like months, and the sound caught her off guard.

Malfoy paused. Then he summoned a tray of food for her, along with some water and tea. She was still seated on the ottoman and he floated the tray onto a small table beside her.

"I would have liked to eat with you, now that you have an appetite again," he said. He tipped her chin back with one finger, then stroked the skin lightly. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. Next time."

Considering how haughty Malfoy had been in school—and how cold and brutal his more recent reputation was—Hermione was surprised at how much he seemed to enjoy physical touch. He was rather a more sensual person than she would have expected.

"I'll be back soon," he said, tucking a curl of Hermione's hair behind her ear. "Stay in here. Maybe you can read more."

"Right," Hermione said, looking down, away from the intensity of his gaze. "Okay."

Once he left, Hermione uncurled herself from the chaise and rose to her feet. She made her way to the office door and pressed her ear to the wood. Would she be able to hear the Death Eaters talking? How many were here?

But Malfoy must have cast a silencing spell on the door—she could hear nothing.

She wiped her palms on her pajama trousers then turned back to face the empty office. One of the most influential soldiers in the Dark forces, and now Hermione was unsupervised in his office. The only smart thing to do was search the room.

She started with his desk. It was dark and made of gleaming wood, cold and minimalistic in a way that reminded Hermione of its owner.

The drawers didn't budge when she tried to open them. There were, however, still some papers on the surface from when he had been working. These Hermione carefully pored over.

It was clear why Malfoy had determined the papers were harmless enough to leave out. Nothing relating to strategy; there was an invitation from the Ministry to some board review, and under it was a letter of thanks for the Malfoy family's contribution to the retired Auror's fund.

Hermione pressed her lips together. She knew the Death Eaters were winning, but seeing the direct correspondence between Malfoy and the Ministry—the unequivocal evidence of how well-established the Dark regime had become—was still disheartening.

There was another slightly thicker stack of papers to the side but that one was fixed in place, immovable to her touch. It was infuriating to be so within reach of what had to be useful information, and yet be unable to see it. She shuffled the Ministry letters to the side and under them she found one other document.

It was face down, and when Hermione tried to turn it over she found that it would not move. She leaned closer, intrigued.

Some sort of Sticking Charm, perhaps, that Malfoy had quickly cast on his way out. The fact that it was apart from the larger, immovable stack seemed to make it somehow more attainable to her. Had he left it out to tempt her? Was it cursed, perhaps? Designed to teach her to stifle her curiosity?

But Malfoy was not the punishing kind, so far.

Hermione squinted at the paper. She could just barely see a trace of ink through the page—no clear lines of writing, only shapes. Bumpy curves, bisecting lines. It seemed like it could be a map.

Hermione tried again to turn over the paper, but Malfoy's magic was very strong. She couldn't even lift a corner, as though the page was laminated to the surface of his desk. She looked around for something sharp, grabbed Malfoy's quill and tried sliding the point of it between the map and the desk. But that didn't accomplish anything other than smearing streaks of black ink over the paper.

After a while, Hermione wandered around the rest of his office, looking at the bookshelves and feeling for seams on the wall. But the only obviously useful thing was still the paper on his desk, and finally she returned to it. The only other thing she could think to try was destructive and inelegant, but she had no more subtle tools at her disposal. There was a glass of water on the dinner tray Malfoy had left, and after a moment's hesitation she picked it up and held it over the page.

The paper was white, his desk was dark. They were pressed close together. With any luck, Hermione would be able to glean at least something as the paper grew transparent from water.

She trickled the liquid carefully, trying to evenly distribute it over all parts of the page.

It worked better than she'd expected, honestly.

The outline of the map grew slightly more visible as the paper grew sodden—Hermione watched for the ink bleed of hand-written notes. Those would likely be the most useful thing. The arc of attack routes, perhaps webbing out of a single point that marked the Death Eater headquarters? Ink was beginning to bleed through and Hermione held her breath, still carefully pouring.

No sweeping lines. Only dots—red ones, sharp and distinct. Some of them had words written next to them, though their meaning was lost as the fine print bled into clouds of ink.

Hermione wished she could read whatever notes Malfoy had written, but too bad. She focused on the red markings. There were three of them, each expanding into dappled rings of crimson as the water loosened the ink from the page. They were destinations on the map. Key locations.

Three locations, and a moment later Hermione realized with a horrible sinking feeling that they were in a very familiar formation. A tall, lopsided triangle—it would have been instantly recognizable to any Order strategist. The three dots were fixtures on every map in the Order war rooms.

The safe houses, the last three that they had left. The locations were meant to be completely Unplottable.

And yet there they were.

~

By the time Malfoy returned from dinner, Hermione had tried and failed and tried and failed twice over to come up with a good strategy. But there was no good strategy, and the only clear emotion she felt was desperation.

She was sitting on the chaise again when he opened the door, and she stood at once, planning to plead her case. To beg him to not tell the others where the safe houses were—did the entire Dark forces know already? But her mouth wouldn't form the words. Hermione just looked at him, knowing her face must be stricken.

He met her eyes, then moved his attention to his soaked desk. His head cocked very slightly to the side as he took the scene in.

Malfoy walked forward and picked up the empty water glass, then placed it back on the untouched dinner tray.

“Resourceful,” he finally said.

“Do all the Death Eaters know the locations?” she asked. “Is there going to be an attack?”

Malfoy's expression was closed.

“Most of the Death Eaters know,” he said, picking up the map. “And there will be an attack.”

He shook it once and it was dry, the ink clean and sharp. He folded it and put it in a drawer, then swept a hand over his desk. The water disappeared.

Hermione felt herself sway.

"When?"

"It's not your concern."

"How could it not be my concern? My friends—the Order—"

Her voice cracked pitifully, and something flickered in Malfoy's face. He paused, looking at her.

"We're only attacking one of the safe houses," he said. "The others we are still determining what to do with."

"Which house?"

"Not the one your friends are in."

He seemed to think this would soothe her, but it only triggered another wave of panic. Hermione tried rapidly to figure out which house was at risk. Not the Surrey house then, where Malfoy had found Hermione to begin with. Nor the one just outside Hogsmeade, where Tonks and Teddy lived.

Which left—

"York?" she asked.

Malfoy said nothing.

"That's the training house," Hermione said, trying to keep her voice steady. "They're just children."

"They're not children," Malfoy responded. He turned from her and sat on one of the leather sofas by the bookshelves. "Eighteen or nineteen, most of them. Older than we were when the war started. And they took out Dolohov's nephew last week."

It was becoming difficult for Hermione to breathe. Listening to Malfoy speak so callously about this was horrible. She felt *complicit*, like she was the one allowing these future deaths to happen.

"Don't do it," she said. "Please."

"It's not my decision."

"You can convince the others to leave the house alone," Hermione said quickly. "Can't you? They would trust you. If you came up with a good reason—"

"I'm afraid I'm quite disinclined to do favors for the Order, as a rule," he replied drily.

"Please, Malfoy," she begged. "Please. As a mercy to me."

He was silent.

Hermione had the sense that she'd stumbled upon a weakness in Malfoy's armor. Nott's words echoed in her head: *Maybe he likes you enough to do as you ask, for instance.*

"I know you would do it for me," Hermione said desperately, doubling down. "You said you would take care of me, didn't you?"

Malfoy's eyes widened for a fraction of a moment. Then his mask returned, but Hermione had found her entry point.

He was seated on the couch and she went to him, dropping to her knees on the floor before him. Malfoy's cold eyes followed her down. She thought she saw his throat work at the sight of her on the ground.

"I'll beg," she said, trying to press her advantage. "I'll beg you for it. Please—will you help me then?"

Malfoy's jaw was tight. He looked at her, his eyes moving slowly over her face.

Then he lifted his hand and touched her chin.

"Go on, then," he finally said. His voice was a little hoarse. "Let's hear it."

Hermione's hands shook but she just clasped them tighter to her thighs, trying to stop the trembling. She didn't want him to know how scared she was. She could feel the heat from Malfoy's legs, was close enough to smell his aftershave. The scent was warm and clean.

"Please," she said, quietly. Begging was easy. She could beg for the Order all day. The words came to her in an unsteady stream—she said whatever she thought Malfoy would most want her to say. "Please. Don't attack the safe house. Do it for me, I promise I'll be so good. I would be so grateful—"

Malfoy's hand, resting on the armrest of the sofa, gripped the leather abruptly, almost convulsively. Hermione recoiled a little in surprise at the sudden movement. His grip was so hard that his knuckles had turned white.

He was watching her. Hermione returned his gaze; his eyes were dark and unsteady and had gone half-lidded at her final sentence, as though the words were a switch that flicked something in his physiology. In the silent room, the way his breaths had gone uneven was obvious.

"Come here," he finally said.

Hermione's heart hammered in her ears. She inched forward on her knees. Would he really do it for her?

Malfoy caught her chin in one firm hand, tipping her face back so he could better look at her. His expression was raw and unguarded.

"Such a good girl," he hissed, lightly squeezing her jaw. "How am I supposed to say no to you?"

Hermione just trembled. Her head was resting in his large palm. His hand was warm and steady.

"What has the Order done to earn such loyalty from you?" he asked. "But if that's what you want, I can do it for you."

Malfoy leaned forward then, his hand still securing her chin. His eyes were hazy, the pupils blown completely out and a flush on his usually pale cheeks.

He kissed her on the cheek first. Hermione heard him make a quiet, low groan of pleasure. He kissed her cheek again.

Malfoy turned her face to the side, then kissed the curve of her jaw.

There was a small part of Hermione that she hated, that was telling her she just ought to just give herself to Malfoy entirely. Who cared if he was bad or wrong? He was so strong, always so in control, and that was what mattered. She would be taken care of with him.

Malfoy mouthed at her jaw, her cheek, her ear—Hermione wondered how long she would have before he turned his attention to her body. Fear curled in her gut. She hoped that he would not humiliate her, that he would just take what he wanted quickly and then let her leave.

But his kisses were close-mouthed, tender and reverent. He didn't move his mouth lower than her neck, and he didn't kiss her on the lips.

Malfoy's breathing came shorter, the exhalations hot and dragon-like against her skin. He nudged her chin up, exposing her throat to him, then dropped his face low to press his mouth to the skin over her pulse. Hermione inhaled sharply, could not stop the small, panicked whine that escaped her at the unexpected feeling of his lips moving gently against her throat.

And then it was over. Malfoy jerked back and Hermione let out a shaking breath.

He wiped the corner of his mouth, his breathing unsteady.

"Alright," he said. "I'll do as you ask."

## Chapter 7

For the longest time, discipline had ruled Malfoy's life. He was a hard worker, a good soldier, a ruthless general.

So surely he was allowed this one little indulgence? Surely he could cede a *little* of the Dark force's victories, for her?

Hermione was warm and soft. She was sweetly pliant under his hands, tipping her head back at his slightest guidance. The noises she made were beautiful.

He was careful not to lose himself and kiss her mouth, although he badly wanted to.

Some Death Eaters were more relaxed about taking their pleasure with half-bloods and muggleborns. But the Malfoy family had always been severely traditional. When Malfoy was a boy, his father had struck him across the face for mentioning that a muggleborn girl at Hogwarts was pretty. The blow had been hard enough to knock him to the ground.

People sometimes didn't understand that the indoctrination was carved bone-deep, as inescapable as family blood.

But if Malfoy didn't think too hard about it, he could convince himself that this was fine. This, with Hermione, was different from the way he touched the young pureblood women that flitted in and out of his bedroom. He *owned* her, after all—she belonged to him, like a piece of art or a prize-winning phoenix. His touches were only possessive, not romantic, and that—surely—was permitted.

When he pulled himself away, he had to press his thumb to the corner of his lips to sate the feeling of loss.

"Get up," he said, once his breathing was under control. "The floor is cold."

Hermione was swaying. She wobbled as she got to her feet and Malfoy reached forward, his hand on her hip, to steady the shaking.

She did not flinch away from his touch—was more and more accustomed to him reaching for her—and Malfoy had to fight the urge to drag her to him. He imagined the barrier between them dwindling to nothing, imagined dressing her for dinners or draping her over his lap while he took meetings.

"Thank you," Hermione said. "Thank you."

Malfoy shivered.

"You're welcome," he said, watching his thumb stroke a gentle circle on her hip, over the thin fabric of her pajamas. He would always give her what she wanted. He would drink her gratitude like it was honeyed wine. "I'll take care of it, sweetheart. Don't worry."

Her eyelids fluttered shut for a moment. Perhaps she liked being given what she wanted as much as he liked giving it.

Malfoy leaned back in his seat.

“It’s late,” he said, summoning a decanter of whiskey and a glass for himself. “Go to bed now. I’ll come see you in the morning.”

Hermione did not need to be told twice. She left his office in a quick scurry, her footsteps trailing into the living room and then out of earshot as she ran down their shared hallway.

Malfoy exhaled slowly, tipped his head back and closed his eyes. He covered his face with one hand—his fingers shook.

After a moment, he locked his office door.

~

It was not the most trivial of things to put a stop to the York attack.

Truthfully, Malfoy probably could have lied to Hermione and just said he’d done it. It would have been easy to leave the plan untouched and manufacture some evidence to the contrary—she would have been none the wiser.

But he loved how trusting she was. He would never punish her for her goodness.

So he did things right.

By the next afternoon, he’d successfully diverted plans away from the attack on York. He’d had to cash in on his credibility, had to come up with alternate plans to make the change in strategy make sense. No one on the Dark Forces suspected Malfoy might have an ulterior motive—it was a new approach for him, a sharp shift from his previously single-minded loyalty to the cause.

But it was worth it.

When he told Hermione it was done, she sagged with relief. She’d thanked him over and over, and he’d touched her cheek, and she’d even leaned into it, just for a moment. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. Hermione’s hair smelled faintly of Dittany, and Malfoy knew this meant she’d followed his bath instructions.

The next favor she asked for came a few days later.

She usually stayed in her room. But her request was evidently urgent enough to compel her to venture out to look for him, and in the small hours of the morning no less. Had she not slept? He was walking back to the house from the training grounds when she found him, sweat still drying on him. The sun was barely up, the light cold and weak.

She shivered in the damp chill of the garden paths, her arms wrapped around herself.

"There's a blocked supply route to the North of London," she said through chattering teeth.  
"Healing supplies can't reach the Order—"

"Why aren't you inside?"

"Please. The route—I found a copy of The Prophet. The injuries..."

Malfoy exhaled irritably through his nose, then steered her inside.

"Please," she asked again. "I'll trade you something."

"Alright. Just—go to your room and get warm," he finally said. "Let me shower."

He'd come to her room when he was clean, his hair still damp. It was warm and soft in her room, smelled like her.

Hermione was still afraid of him. She quivered under his fingers as he grazed his hand across her shoulder, her collarbone. She wouldn't meet his eyes. But when Malfoy pressed his mouth to the pulse point of her throat, dragging his lips softly back and forth, she made quiet, gulping gasps at the sensation. The noise was intoxicating.

He could not stop himself from gripping her waist a little in response. He let the tips of his fingers slide—just barely—up the bottom of her jumper.

"So good," he praised when she braced her hand on his shoulder, her fingers gripping the muscle for balance. He nipped the pale skin under her ear and she quivered from head to toe.  
"You can hold onto me whenever you want."

And then he pulled himself back—and that was it—and that was another trade.

Frustratingly over and yet clearly and achingly unfinished.

So the next time she asked for something, he asked for more.

"Sleep in my bed with me tonight."

"No," Hermione said at once.

"I won't do anything to you. I just want you closer."

"No deal."

He inhaled, then exhaled.

"It's not enough," he said quietly, an admission. "And you're mine. I could just make you."

But when she stormed away with another quick, miserable shake of her head, he did not follow her.

Hermione had been starting to wander more of her own accord, but after that her bedroom door stayed shut. Malfoy did not see her for two days.

Self-loathing and frustration mixed into a bitter bile in Malfoy's chest. He tried to drive himself to exhaustion with training, with work. He didn't want to think. He even summoned Astoria in a desperate bid for distraction.

Her presence did not do anything for him, but when she undressed and pulled him to her Malfoy tried to stay entirely present throughout. *This* was what he was supposed to want, he told himself as his fingers dug into Astoria's hips, as his body drummed a rough pattern into her.

The next morning, Malfoy wrapped himself in armored robes and left the house. There was an assignment in Wales that promised some bloodshed. Six traitors had barricaded themselves inside an old pureblood home. Former soldiers, caught siphoning thousands of galleons of funds into their own vaults—trading in information for both sides. Whoring themselves out for no cause at all, in other words.

Malfoy detested them.

He might not have the same conviction rooted deep in his soul towards the Dark cause that his father had, or his father's father—but at least he was disciplined and hardened enough to commit himself anyway. And if he had to buck up and bear the mantle of his family's name, then so should everyone else.

The whole thing lasted three days and Malfoy returned with the red twilight sun setting at his back, dirt and blood crusted rusty on his robes.

The house was unlit and cold, and he automatically confirmed that the security wards were still tight and humming, that the only magical signatures in the house besides Hermione were Nott and Pansy, who were up in the guest wing.

Malfoy trudged down the hall and into his dark bedroom, then unclasped his protective outer robes and shed them. He grimaced in distaste at the bleeding gashes on his hands, was just examining to see how deep the wounds were when there was a light knock at his open door.

Hermione stood just out in the hall, her curly hair framed by a little halo of light from the hanging lamps behind her.

"Hi." He tried to sound as warm as he could despite exhaustion.

"You were gone for a long time," Hermione said.

Somehow he hadn't thought she'd notice. He imagined her simply existing as usual in his absence—meals brought to her on silver trays, his bookshelves at her disposal.

"Just an assignment," he said finally, unlacing his boots.

Hermione lingered in the doorway.

"Are your hands hurt?" she asked.

"A little," he said. "Poorly contained explosion."

She didn't say anything and he fought to keep his eyes lowered, to not look up. Eye contact startled prey animals. And there was only one obvious hunter between the two of them.

"Bored?" he asked lightly, unstrapping his arm guards. They dropped to the floor, sending powdered dried dirt and ash falling onto the gleaming hardwood.

"I wasn't sure if you were going to come back."

Hermione's voice was unexpectedly thin and Malfoy looked at her.

"It's just," Hermione continued, voice high and fast. "If something had happened to you—I'd be left alone here. And maybe your Death Eater friends would have found me, and you wouldn't be here—and you didn't even tell me you were leaving—"

Her hands were shaking terribly.

"Okay," Malfoy said, straightening up. "Alright, just take a breath. I'm sorry. You're right."

He left the rest of his gear on and walked to her. Looming over her didn't feel like the most comforting stance, so he pulled her into the chair closest to the door and crouched before her, so their eyes were level.

"Were you like this the whole time I was gone?"

"No," came her instant, wobbling response. "Not right away."

Malfoy's own demise was not something he ever considered a possibility, as a rule. But he realized that Hermione was right to be frightened. If something *had* happened to him, she would be trapped here and entirely defenseless.

The thought was dark and horrifying.

"*Accio* Malfoy ring," he said.

His signet ring flew from its position by his dresser and into his palm.

It was a complex charm, but one Malfoy had performed before. The ring glowed blue, then white.

He conjured a chain, slipped the ring through it, then handed it to her.

"It's a kind of Portkey. It will activate if I die, and take you away from here."

Hermione stared at him. She didn't move to reach for it, and Malfoy extended his hand further, gently nudging her shaking knuckles with his hand. Finally she pried her fingers apart and took the chain from him.

"Where will it take me?"

"The Surrey safe house."

She looked at the ring, her brow furrowed. Malfoy stood. He turned back to his dresser to treat his injury.

"Aren't you afraid I'll try to kill you?" Hermione's voice came from behind him. "To escape?"

"Well," he said, pouring a skin-stitching potion on his hand. "If anyone has a fighting chance it's you. In my home and all."

There was silence as he wrapped his hands.

"Thank you," she finally said.

"You skipped your Dittany bath," he said after a moment. "I can tell."

"I'm sorry. I forgot. I was—distracted."

"You should do it tonight."

There was a pause.

"You could help me with it now," Hermione said haltingly. "If you want."

Malfoy's breath stuck in his throat, but he just nodded without looking at her.

Hermione climbed into the bath of her own volition this time.

Like before, she was clothed. Like before, Malfoy transfigured her clothes into pajamas and cleaned them so her water wouldn't get dirty. He ran the tap for her. He poured half a vial of Dittany into the tub.

"Do you think your hands will scar?" she asked.

"Maybe."

"Don't you care?"

"I already have scars. It doesn't matter if I get more."

"You worried about my legs scarring. After I tried to escape."

He smiled wryly.

"You're unmarked. We should keep it that way, don't you think?"

He ran his knuckle slowly across her arm, as though to demonstrate how smooth and soft the skin was.

"Are they lacerations?" she asked, eyeing his bandages.

"Yes."

“Can I see?”

“If you want.”

He undid the fresh bandages and extended his arm.

Hermione’s wet, soapy fingers took tentative hold of his hand. They were warm from the hot water. It was the first time since she’d been here that she was touching him instead of the other way around.

She traced the edge of the injury with her finger. Her touch was on the center of his palm, where his skin was sensitive—and it felt intimate. Malfoy breathed out quietly. He watched as Hermione picked up the vial of Dittany and poured a few drops onto her fingers. She carefully ran the medicinal oil along Malfoy’s injury.

“I know it won’t do much,” she said. “But there’s no sense in letting you scar if we can prevent it.”

Her words were quiet and warm in the silence of the large bathroom. The soapy water sloshed quietly each time her elbow shifted, as she carefully applied medicine to an injury that Malfoy would ordinarily take no note of. But he let her treat it anyway.

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hermione had lived long enough to know that the only peace to be had in this gruesome world was in doing the right thing. Being a good person was vital. It was a core tenet of her identity—without the boundaries of morality, there was only chaos.

That was one of the primary reasons that being kept in comfortable captivity by Malfoy was so distressing.

It would have been one thing if she hated every moment. And she *did* hate being his captive, she did. But it was safe here. How could she ignore something so precious? For the first time in years, nights passed without nightmares. Her hands were shaking less.

She was protected by a Death Eater—protected by the Dark forces. And sometimes, she did not want to leave.

What kind of person did that make her?

Hermione couldn't help it. She wanted to be safe, she had *so badly missed* feeling safe. Not having to wonder what deaths she would have to witness, what new horrors each day would bring—she hadn't been sure she'd ever get to live like this again. It was a fantasy come to life, felt like a broken childhood repaired.

She tried to remind herself that she didn't need Malfoy's protection, that once she escaped and returned to the safe house she wouldn't miss safety. Her virtue would be enough to keep her warm.

But then Malfoy had disappeared, and Hermione got to experience firsthand how thoroughly she fell apart.

He was gone one day. And then he was gone two. Hermione's fears twisted and grew into horned demons. Malfoy was never coming back. He was dead. The other Death Eaters would come to kill her now. The Order was coming to kill her now—to punish her for abandoning them. And there was no one who could protect her from a single thing.

Then, on the third night, Malfoy was suddenly back. Hermione was so relieved that she pretended not to see the blood on his robes.

The look on his face when he'd seen how poorly she was doing, the tender focus as he took in every sign of her panic. She would never forget that expression. Like he had messed up—like he'd done something wrong. Like he was going to make it right for her.

Afterwards, he gave her the Portkey ring. She wore it to bed that night under her shirt, against her skin that still smelled like Dittany.

She hated herself for finding any comfort here. But there was one thing that gave her solace: she was still helping the Order. So her time here could not be all bad, could it? She was doing a good thing.

In only one week she'd saved over a dozen Order lives. She'd unblocked a supply route, she'd saved the York house. Malfoy did everything she asked him to.

Hermione fixated on this thought. Hyper-focus had always been one of her primary traits, and the traumatic years of the war had molded it into something more like anxious obsession.

The next morning, Hermione tore a page from a notebook and sat at the little oak desk in her bedroom. She started writing. She wanted to note down every single thing she could think of that would help the Order. She would fix everything for them, she would make her time here worth it.

Hermione wouldn't have balked at making a hundred trades with Malfoy—two hundred, three hundred. But a very different sort of issue became obvious as she struggled to fill the page. Hermione grappled with a frustrating lack of information.

She knew very little about what was presently happening in the war, having been insulated from it for weeks. What battles were the Order engaged in? What advantages did the Death Eaters have that she could mitigate?

Hermione pushed back from the desk and stood. The last Daily Prophet she'd found had been in the servants' kitchen, and she went there now. Though she knew that Malfoy spent the early hours of every morning out on the training grounds, she still took care to walk quietly. She was wary of drawing his attention on the off-chance he'd decided to skip a day.

The memory of what he'd said to her, back in the Order prison, flashed in her mind.

*Once I return to my usual training regimen I'm sure my body will be much more to your liking.*

Hermione shivered and walked faster.

There was another copy of the Prophet in the kitchens, though it took a while of rifling to find it at the bottom of a trash can. She pulled it out with shaking fingers, tried to smooth out the creases, and sat down to read.

The Ministry had issued new warrants for Order members—that was something she could try to alleviate.

Hermione carefully jotted down the names on her little piece of notebook paper, trying to keep count of how many favors she would owe Malfoy. Once that was done, she tore the original article from the newspaper—fastidiously folding the page over and over along the same crease to get a straight line before ripping it out—and set it to the side in case she needed to review the details later.

She moved to another article and did the same.

Burned down homes of Order sympathizers. New laws banning the distribution of Order propaganda. Targeted attacks on train stations at common travel points.

Scribble scribble. Bend and fold—another tragedy in print, pushed across the table.

Again.

Again.

Again.

At some point, Hermione noticed that she was shaking violently. She pressed her hands to her eyes, trying to breathe. Why did it feel like the entire weight of the war was on her shoulders? How did this come to be? Would it be like this forever—

“What are you doing?”

Hermione gasped and jerked her hands away from her face. She knocked a plate from the table and it fell to the floor and shattered.

Malfoy was behind her. He was damp with sweat.

“Nothing,” Hermione said. Her voice sounded tinny and broken. She groped along the table for a nearby fork. “I’m fine, I’m good. I was just—I was just—eating—”

Malfoy gestured with two fingers and the broken plate shards levitated from the ground, reassembling themselves before flying into a cupboard.

Hermione tried to stand but he caught her by the wrist. He pushed her back into the chair so she stayed where she was.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing. I told you.”

Malfoy’s gaze moved to the patchwork of ripped newspaper on the table. Hermione moved a little as though to shield it from view, then sagged. Who cared if he saw—she had to ask for the favors at some point, anyway.

Malfoy picked up one of the newspaper pieces. Hermione watched dully as he examined it. He picked up another.

“The Order needs a lot of help,” Hermione said. “I want to make more deals with you. But I just need—I just need a bit more time to put together all the requests. Could I get more copies of the Prophet? New ones each day, for information. I won’t be able to find out enough otherw—”

“Enough,” Malfoy interrupted quietly. His voice was cold.

Hermione's mouth closed.

Malfoy flicked his fingers and all the newspaper went up in a bright burst of flame. Hermione gasped and lunged for them but the fire disappeared as quickly as flash paper, leaving only ash. Before Hermione knew what was happening her chair was being dragged forward, being spun on its legs to face Malfoy. He leaned over her, teeth bared.

She could smell the faint sweat on him, the damp outdoors scent of the pines by the training grounds.

“Do you think that I brought you here so you could keep killing yourself for the Order?”

His cold grey eyes were close enough for her to count each blond eyelash. Hermione opened and closed her mouth but no words came out.

“I must not have been clear enough,” he hissed, dragging her chair a little closer. “Let me do so now. I’m a man who needs to handle things, Hermione. I like control—I *need* control. I can handle you perfectly, *if only you’d let me.*”

These last words were spoken so intensely that they were almost a snarl.

He took her jaw in his hand, tipping her face up to look at him. Hermione choked back a sob of fear. He was so close to her, so large.

“I want you without a worry in that pretty head,” he said, the words slow and clear. “Do you understand? I want you lying on my sofa, in my bed, curled in my lap like a cat. I want you in the clothes I give you, reading the books on my shelves, kicking your feet. *Bored.* Let me take care of things. I need it and you need it too.”

Hermione tried to pull back but his hand around her jaw was unyielding.

“Why?” she managed to ask, horrified. “Why—why would you—”

“No more,” Malfoy hissed. “You like deals, so I’ll make you one now. Do as I say—give me what I need—and I’ll do more than take care of you. I’ll take care of your Order too. Sufficiently compelling? No more little favors, no more little trades. All the responsibility: mine.”

Malfoy’s eyes were all pupil, the darkness swallowing any visible iris. Hermione jerked back in shock and this time he let her go.

“I’m expected to take you at your word?” she asked, voice shaking. “You would never care enough about the Order to truly help. And what happens when you come to your senses?”

“I’ll do whatever you want to prove my intentions. Name it. I’m tired of waiting.”

Hermione stared at him. Then, she knew what to say.

“Take an Unbreakable Vow.”

There was a pause. Malfoy examined her.

"Greedy," he said, finally. "And I suppose you propose to take one too?"

His voice was calm; Hermione was chilled by it. Was he so really desensitized to games of life and death?

"Yes," Hermione said, deciding on the spot. "But only if it's temporary. The arrangement lasts a year. You have to do everything you can to help the Order for that time, and—and I'll do whatever you want too. Afterwards, you let me go."

Malfoy smiled. He had not moved back, was still leaning over her. He moved even closer now, brought his hand to rest on the thin silver chain around her neck, his face close to hers. His fingers played lightly with the metal, then he gently pulled at it, drawing the heavy ring out from under her shirt.

"You've never designed such a serious vow before, have you?" he asked, idly rolling the ring between his fingers. "Are you prepared to die if you break it?"

Hermione pressed her lips together, willing them not to shake. She nodded.

He only laughed, like she was a child who'd done something sweet.

"How about this. I'll take the Vow but leave you free of it. Proof that opening yourself to me means relief from burdens."

Hermione fought back a shiver.

"Consider it a sign of my good faith," he went on softly. Lovingly. "I'd rather earn your submission anyway."

Hermione would be unconfined—unbound by any real promise. And the Order would be guaranteed Malfoy's protection. It was not an offer she was capable of refusing.

"How are you alright with this?" she whispered. "I don't understand. I thought you cared about your cause."

He snorted.

"I'll protect Order lives. It won't win them the war."

"And what if it does?"

He smiled, leaning close to nuzzle his nose softly against her cheek.

"Then I suppose I'll be a hero, won't I?"

~

They were both very aware that if anyone learned of Malfoy's new responsibility, he would be killed. As such, they performed a Dark variation of the Vow—one designed for discretion. One that didn't require a third person.

More dangerous and more volatile, as all Dark magic was.

In the academic diagrams Hermione had seen, the Unbreakable Vow involved the two people clasping hands. The hands were held upright—like comrades making an alliance. But Malfoy took her hand like a lover, like a gentleman from a storybook. He held her fingers in his palm, rubbed her knuckles softly with his thumb.

“Will you help the Order?” Hermione asked, taking care to speak clearly. “Will you use your position in the Dark Forces to spare their lives where possible?”

“I will,” Malfoy said.

A sparking tendril of light coiled around their hands. Hermione swallowed.

“And will—and will you do so for only one year?” she asked. “And afterwards release me to freedom?”

“I will.”

The tendril flashed bright scarlet, coiled a little tighter. Hermione fought the urge to cover her eyes against the light.

Her next words had been unrehearsed, but they came out of her now—anxious and impulsive.

“Promise not to be cruel to me,” she said quickly. “Promise you won’t change your mind and hurt me—”

She didn’t know if he would do it—words mattered in something like this. The wrong language, too vague or too strict, could mean death.

But Malfoy just brought her knuckles to his lips and kissed them. His eyes met hers, sharp and hungry.

“I will,” he said.

The red light fizzled and flared as it closed in over their hands, hot as a crucible of fire.

## Chapter End Notes

👉 thanks for your patience

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Notes

Some TW in the end notes <3

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Hermione wasn't even the one bound by the Vow, but already she was regretting it. This was a mistake—Dark magic was *always* a mistake.

But it was too late.

The red light around their hands spit and twisted like oil dripped onto a flame. A single, sizzling spark of it leapt away from their joined hands and shot up Malfoy's arms, pulsing and weaving as it traced the path of his veins. It snaked over his shoulders, down to his chest, then flared bright before diving like a striking viper into the spot over his heart.

Malfoy hissed in pain.

He staggered forward, his hands leaving Hermione's. It was like something had hit him. He groaned and when he gritted his teeth, Hermione saw that there was blood in his mouth.

She reached for his chest at once, scrambling to find the injury.

Bleeding from the mouth—that could be lung damage or trauma to the abdomen. Or he could have suffered a seizure that had made him bite through his tongue. Her hands fluttered desperately over his heart, his ribcage, searching—

Malfoy caught both her hands in one of his own. His fingers were long and wrapped easily around both her wrists, pinning them like wings on a dove, keeping her still.

“It’s fine,” Malfoy panted, lowering her hands. “You can relax.”

Hermione reeled with the relief of hearing him speak.

“Why are you bleeding?” Hermione asked. “What did it do?”

Malfoy looked pale but seemed to be recovering himself. He touched his mouth, examining the blood.

“The spell caused some damage when it took hold. That’s all.”

Hermione tried to remain calm.

"The Unbreakable Vow isn't supposed to cause physical damage," she said. She remembered this from the textbooks. "It binds to the soul."

Malfoy cast a fond glance at her. Like she was endearingly—but hopelessly—naïve.

"It's Dark Magic, Granger. It binds to flesh."

Hermione absorbed this new information. A horrible suspicion rose in her mind.

"You do—have a soul?" she asked. "All of a soul? That's not why we had to use this version—?"

Malfoy looked amused.

"You mean, am I like *Voldemort*?"

It was a shock to hear Malfoy use the name. Voldemort had been dead for years, but most people still avoided saying his name out loud.

"Yes," she said shakily. "That's what I meant."

Malfoy just watched her through those frosty, brooding eyes.

"No," he finally said. He conjured a towel and wiped his hand. "I have all my parts, darling. You don't have to worry about that."

"Okay," she said. "Sorry. I didn't mean to—assume."

"Don't be. I like knowing how your mind works."

Malfoy finished cleaning his hand and went to the sink to rinse out his mouth. When he was done, neither of them spoke for a long moment. The large kitchen was so quiet that Hermione could hear the call of blackbirds outside, their distant song barely audible through the windows.

Then, Malfoy walked to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair. He dragged it a little further away, turned it so it was facing her, and then sat down.

"So," he said. "My part of the deal is done."

A prickle of apprehension ran up Hermione's spine. She forced herself to breathe.

Malfoy's eyes were cold and clear in the morning sunlight. A single strand of pale blond hung over them, glinting. He leaned back in his seat, watching her intently.

"Come here."

Hermione didn't want to. It took a tremendous amount of effort to quell the instinct that told her to run away.

But this was the deal she'd made. Hermione thought of the Order.

Slowly, hesitantly, she made her way towards him.

Malfoy watched her approach, a muscle in his jaw working. His eyes followed her, remaining fixed on hers until she stopped in front of him. Hermione was close enough to hear his breathing go slightly uneven.

He exhaled quietly.

"Sit down," he said.

Malfoy tapped his leg with one long finger.

Hermione's hands shook.

"I—um—"

"Sit down, sweetheart."

*Curled in my lap like a cat*, he'd said.

Grown women were not meant to sit on knees. It was absurd and demeaning and so strange—but that was what Malfoy wanted.

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek, hard enough to draw blood, then looked down at Malfoy's thighs. He was still in his training clothes from earlier in the morning. Through the lightweight fabric of his trousers Hermione made out the relaxed, athletic lines of his legs.

At least they looked sturdy.

She took another step forward, closing all the remaining distance between them, putting them too close for comfort. Then, bracing a hand awkwardly onto Malfoy's broad shoulder, she lowered herself onto him.

It was hard to balance; she teetered for a moment, unfamiliar with the position. But then Malfoy wrapped a large hand around her hip and dragged her firmly towards him, secured her against his chest.

He took a quiet, shuddering breath.

Hermione turned her face away, her eyes wide with panic. Her heart hammered thunderously.

Malfoy was *so warm*, so much of their bodies were touching. Her full weight rested on him. It was so deeply, incalculably overwhelming. Her legs on his hard thighs, the curve of her hip pressed into the muscles of his stomach. His face was right next to hers, if she turned to look at him their mouths would be at risk of pressing together. All around her was the warmth of him, the heat from his body permeating through her clothes and her skin like there was nothing between them.

"Look at you," came his soft voice. His chest vibrated with the low praise. "What a treat you are."

She felt him put two fingers under her chin, tipping her face back to look at him.

His eyes were soft and hazy with some unnameable emotion.

“Don’t hide, darling.” His fingers kept her chin up. “Stay here with me.”

Hermione’s face burned with humiliation. She was sitting on his lap, the contact was prolonged and embarrassing. But Malfoy’s attention was unabashed, no hint of self consciousness or mockery in his face.

He examined her face with intent focus. Then, he lifted his hand and brought it to her nose, traced the slope of it with a single finger. His lips parted slightly, like he was surprised that she was solid. Like he had thought she might dissipate beneath his touch.

Hermione could do nothing but remain still and let him do—whatever this was.

She looked resolutely back at him, since he’d asked her to.

There were faint scars on his face that Hermione had never noticed before. A thin one on his cheek, another that stretched pale and jagged along the line of his jaw. Subtle, violent imperfections on an otherwise perfectly symmetrical facade.

Hermione stared at the scar on his jaw, wondering what weapon could have broken his skin in such a shape.

“Do my scars frighten you?” Malfoy asked.

She tore her eyes guiltily away. She shouldn’t have been staring.

“I—don’t know,” she stammered. “Yes.”

“Don’t be scared. They’re just proof that I’m not afraid to get my hands dirty.”

She didn’t answer.

Malfoy touched her cheek, ran the back of his knuckle gently up and down over her skin.

“You’ll stay here, and I’ll go out there,” he whispered, eyes locked on hers. “And I’ll just take care of everything for us.”

Hermione hardly breathed. There was something so tender in his face, so *devoted*.

Haltingly, she nodded.

Malfoy smiled. He leaned forward to kiss her on the tip of her nose, then eased her gently off his lap. He kept a hand on her waist, making sure she didn’t stumble.

Once she was steady, he stood.

“Move your things to my room,” he said. He turned to the side and straightened his clothes. “Please.”

Then he took her chin in his hand and kissed her on the nose once more.

"You did so well. Go on now—I'll give you some time to get settled in. I'll come see you later."

Hermione felt like all of this was happening to a different person, and she was simply observing. It was all so surreal; perhaps she was simply so shocked by everything that her brain couldn't keep up.

She nodded, incapable of speech. She wanted to ask Malfoy to be gentle with her—wanted to ask for an extra day or two to get used to things before she had to be *available* for him in his bedroom—but that would require voicing that particular concern. And Hermione simply didn't feel capable of letting her mind wander that far.

Instead, she just left the kitchen. She felt Malfoy's gaze at her back as she walked away.

As soon as she was through the door, some of the shock cleared enough for the panic to begin closing in. Hermione walked faster and faster, then started running. She kept her mind entirely blank—if she thought about anything but the floors pounding beneath her feet, she was going to pass out. She ran all the way to her room and then closed the door behind her.

Hermione's eyes landed on the bottle of Calming Draught.

There was no use being proud any longer; Malfoy owned her anyway, she may as well have a little relief. She picked up the bottle and tore the wax seal off with shaking hands, then tipped the potion to her lips and drank it all. One bottle contained two doses, but this felt like a situation that permitted a little heavy handedness.

One breath in, one breath out. Slow and measured, trying to think of nothing. She just needed the potion to make its way through her nervous system, and then she could go face her fate. It had been so long since she'd had access to Calming Draught, and within seconds she felt it start to work—she gasped in relief as the ever-present cacophony of anxiety that plagued her began to dull into a murmur.

This was not forever, she told herself calmly. This was just for right now, just for this fleeting moment. Time was only a perception, and in other-dimensional realities perhaps a year passed in the blink of an eye. Perhaps a year was already over...

Hermione let out a dry sob.

She gave herself a few minutes to muster up the courage to proceed. But after a while, she knew if she waited any longer that the potion might actually start to wear *off*, and that prospect was too terrible to entertain. So Hermione left her room. She shut her door quietly behind her, and walked down the hall to her new quarters.

Malfoy's room looked bigger and colder than she remembered, or maybe that was just the new context hanging over her head. Everything looked so unfamiliar in the daylight; she realized she'd only been here in the evenings before. The windows were huge, the daytime view outside was that of the wintry grounds.

The whole room was devoid of color. The walls were eggshell white, all the furniture heavy and dark. Straight, hard lines everywhere—the modern drape of the curtains, the angled metal of the lamps. Nothing out of place, nothing sentimental.

It felt *nothing* like a home.

Somehow, this miserable thought was the only one that managed to pierce through the fog of Calming Draught. Hermione's heart broke, crumpled in her chest like a piece of trash. What a stupid reason to feel sad—she had not had a real home since Hogwarts, after all. So what difference did yet another bare setting make? It was all a nightmare anyway, all one unending horror ever since the war started.

Hermione decided that one bottle of Calming Draught was clearly insufficient for her present circumstance.

She could look for more of the potion—that was as good and distracting a use of her time as any. How else was she meant to survive this first night?

Malfoy had kept Dittany for her in his bathroom, she remembered. Perhaps he had other supplies intended for her in there too.

Hermione entered the bathroom, opening and searching drawers and cabinets. There were things in some of them that seemed to indicate Malfoy had hoped she would be living in his room soon. An untouched silver-backed hairbrush with delicate engravings on the handle. Hair ribbons, an unopened bottle of perfume. She ignored these, trying not to think of what Malfoy had said about wanting to dress her, and finally found the Dittany in the bottom drawer below the righthand sink, in a wooden case. She moved it aside and groped around the back of the drawer, and there she finally found the Calming Draught.

There were only a few bottles, but that was far better than nothing. Hermione pulled the stopper off one bottle and drank it. As a Healer, she knew very well that side effects of overconsumption included drowsiness and nausea. But frankly, both sounded better than retaining any semblance of sobriety. She tipped back another bottle, just to be safe, then sat on the edge of the tub.

Hermione covered her face with her hands.

It was good that the potions were already working their magic, because she had the sense that the despair currently roiling in her chest would be quite unlivable without the help of some medicinal brew. With each beat of her heart, that pain grew a little more distant. And soon, a blessed blanket of numbness wrapped itself cozily around her.

Hermione exhaled in relief and lowered her hands.

She stood, but then—swaying—decided she better sit down again. She missed the edge of the tub, but sitting on the floor seemed perfectly acceptable too.

The room spun.

Seconds passed. Minutes?

The lights over Malfoy's mirrors had turned wobbly and hazy. They looked like dancing fireflies. Hermione tried to count them, since numbers were always a safe thing to think about, devoid of all emotion or fear.

One light. Two lights. Three lights. It was almost like counting sheep.

Four lights. Five lights.

She blinked blearily, lost count, began counting again.

One light. Two lights... three lights... four...

"Well," came Malfoy's voice from somewhere above her.

Hermione opened her eyes with a start.

Her vision was blurred and her mouth was dry. She had fallen asleep—some unknown stretch of time had passed. She coughed and tried to sit up, but fell back again.

Malfoy's silhouette loomed over her, tall and dark.

Her vision was too unclear to see his expression, so she looked instead at the long legs of his trousers, the black socks that were only centimeters from her face. But looking at anything made her head pound.

Hermione made a weak whine of discomfort and turned her face towards the ground. The marble was cool against her cheek.

Above her, Malfoy sighed.

She heard his robes rustle as he bent over her, and then his large hand was on hers. She was still gripping the empty bottle of Calming Draught, it seemed, and he pried it from her fist. She heard a clink as he examined the other empty bottle on the floor.

He clicked his tongue.

"This is how you take care of yourself?" he asked softly. "Hermione..."

Suddenly, the world rushed away. Malfoy had picked her up—his arms lifted her easily to his chest, and Hermione tried not to hurl. The dark trousers in her line of sight were replaced by the white stretch of his starched shirt, a row of buttons down the center. He was much warmer than the cold floor had been, though, and Hermione turned her face into his chest. He nudged one of her arms around his neck and she took hold of it.

"Alright, love," he said. "Time for bed."

A distant, very dull echo of panic stirred murkily in her, but there was enough potion in Hermione to shove it lazily to the side.

"Bed," she repeated miserably.

He breathed out of his nose shortly in quiet laughter.

"Yes. Bed."

A moment later, he set her down. There was a thick blanket under her, downy and plush. Hermione rubbed her nose gratefully against the soft fabric; it smelled good.

She kept her eyes closed to keep from heaving, but elsewhere in the room she heard a sink running. Malfoy's footsteps moved quietly around. Then, there was the distinctive sound of a man undressing. Hermione heard a belt clink, heard fabric shift. Drawers opening and closing, the rustle of clothing.

Silence for a bit. When Hermione turned to look up Malfoy was standing over her, head tipped to the side as he examined her. He was wearing a loose-fitting dark shirt and pajama bottoms.

Malfoy wore pajamas? Like a human?

He sat on the edge of the bed, close to her.

"You need to change," he said. He brushed her hair out of her face. "Those clothes aren't suitable for sleep."

Hermione didn't even remember what she put on this morning.

"I don't want to change," she said.

"I can transfigure your clothes, then?"

Hermione didn't say anything.

"Like that time in the bathtub," Malfoy went on, speaking more slowly.

"I know what transfiguration is," Hermione snapped. She was lucid enough to be indignant.

Malfoy laughed.

"Sorry," he said, absently winding a curl of her hair around his finger. "You seem quite out of it."

"What are you going to make me wear?"

"Something for sleep."

"Fine," she said, burying her face in the covers again.

The fabric of Hermione's clothes rippled once, then shifted over her skin as it changed form.

She felt cold air on her legs and her arms.

For a horrible moment, Hermione was sure Malfoy had made her naked. She scrambled to cover herself—but there was fabric there, as it turned out. She was in some kind of nightdress—a slip? It was blue, or maybe green. The fabric was thin but the dress was long, at least past her knees. Old-fashioned, delicate.

There were flowers embroidered on the fabric, and she ran her finger over them.

"Hydrangeas—" she began, but then Malfoy started crawling into bed next to her. Hermione jerked backwards in panic.

"I'm not going to do anything to you," he said, reaching for her. "Don't be scared."

Malfoy pulled her to him. He was very strong, which was not a good thing for Hermione to be reminded of just now.

Malfoy's body was incredibly warm. It had been a very long time since Hermione had lain in anyone's arms, and all the sensations felt unfamiliar. His hand over her stomach, his chin against her head. The smell of him all around her.

Hermione could feel the soft hairs on his forearm under her wrist.

"Malfoy," Hermione said. Her voice cracked. "I don't—I think—"

"I'm just going to hold you tonight. We're going to sleep, that's it."

Hermione was silent for a moment, still on her guard. She maintained vigilant awareness on the movement of his hand, which smoothed calmly over her hip. But it never wandered higher or lower.

"All that potion, hm?" Malfoy mumbled. He sounded a little sleepy, which surprised her. She had never seen Malfoy sleepy before. "Not very wise of you."

"I—guess not."

"Scared little thing..."

His hand still remained in one place, and Hermione relaxed infinitesimally. There was something evolutionarily soothing about being held, about sharing body heat.

"What are you so scared of?" Malfoy asked after a moment, his voice low and drowsy.

"Everything," she said, disbelieving. What kind of question was that? "People. Getting hurt. The future..."

"Me?"

"Yes. Monsters."

He laughed into the pillow.

"You think I'm a monster?"

"Yes."

Hermione was—unbelievably—getting sleepy too. It seemed Malfoy was not imminently planning on having his way with her, and as a result the sedating effects of the Calming Draught started to overpower her lingering adrenaline. She was exhausted.

"Yes," she repeated, trying to continue the train of thought. What had she been saying? Her head still hurt. "A monster. Even your name... In the Latin, I mean. Greek? The—the original etymology..."

She yawned and Malfoy laughed, his chest rumbling lightly behind her.

"Right," he said. "The original etymology."

"Yes," she said. "Dragon."

"But I'm not actually a dragon."

"Yes. You are."

"That's a very prescriptivist attitude towards names..."

"You're a dragon," Hermione insisted, irritated. Why was he being difficult, when her head hurt like this?

Malfoy laughed again. She felt him tuck his nose into her neck, felt the hot exhale of his breath against her skin.

"Alright," he mumbled. "I can be a dragon."

## Chapter End Notes

Depictions of panic attacks/implied dissociation. Hermione is an anxiety girly, as you probably know, so hopefully this is not a surprise. She is also worried about non-consent, though no non-consent happens. It's probably worth noting that there may be further dub-con elements as the story progresses, so you should be careful if those things are triggering to you! I will try to call them out in chapter notes as they become relevant though.

Thank you for reading - comments are my tip jar!!

## Chapter 10

The next morning, Malfoy rose just before sunrise—as was his routine.

What was *not* of his usual routine was the subsequent decision he made to stay in bed. But for the first time ever, it seemed, he had a reason to linger in the sheets.

Hermione was small and warm next to him, fitting into his arms as neatly as a wrapped parcel. Malfoy lay sleepily with her. He smoothed his hand over the gentle curve of her hip, the hollow of her waist.

The ferocity of his satisfaction was dizzying.

She was right here, right next to him. *Sleeping*. His very own sweet little woman to guard, to play with and lay affection upon.

Malfoy touched her, trailing his fingers up her side. Her form was so lovely. All soft skin and delicate slopes was his girl—so unlike the hard lines of his own body.

After a while, Hermione started to stir.

She made a groggy noise of confusion first, then turned her head. Her cheek came into contact with his chest and she opened her eyes.

Malfoy looked down at her. Hermione went rigid.

“Good morning,” Malfoy said. “How did you sleep?”

“Fine,” she said after a moment. Her voice cracked. “Headache...”

He pulled her closer and tucked his nose into her neck, breathing in. She smelled good.

Was this what it would have been like, in some other reality where they lived together normally? Drowsy mornings with his face against her skin...

“Don’t be scared,” he said.

He smoothed a calming hand over her back, her shoulders. Malfoy was not well-versed in comforting people, but after a while she seemed to relax a little.

“I had at least six doses of Calming Draught,” she muttered miserably, remembering. She looked down at her nightgown. “You undressed me?”

“I transfigured your clothes.”

“Oh,” she said. Her fingers found the stitched hydrangea. “Right... I remember.”

They were silent for a moment. Malfoy smoothed his hand over her nightgown.

"I want to see you," he said. "Can I?"

He could ask for that now, couldn't he?

Hermione stopped breathing. He waited for her answer.

"Alright," she finally said.

Malfoy let out a quiet exhale. He carefully trailed his palm down her ribs. His fingers shook. He continued past her stomach and thighs, stopping only when he reached the hem of her nightgown.

He took hold of the cloth and lifted the fabric up.

The skirt bunched as it slid up over Hermione's knees, her thighs. Revealing soft expanses of rosy skin.

She seemed to be trying to accept her fate stoically. But her eyes flickered with fear.

"I won't hurt you," Malfoy said. "You can be sure. The Vow would kill me if I did."

Hermione licked her lips, then nodded.

Malfoy slid the dress higher, hiking it up around her hips. He stared greedily as more of her body was revealed.

There were fine hairs on Hermione's legs and they stood on end, goosebumps rising all over her skin.

Her *thighs*, her underwear. The tiny blue bow on the front elastic... He could bite her gently, just there. Malfoy's vision swam.

He pressed a shaking hand to Hermione's lower stomach, toyed with the little blue bow on her underwear with the index and third fingers of his right hand. His hand looked good on her.

After a moment's hesitation, he slid his fingers between her knees, slightly parting her legs.

"So sweet," he breathed. "My sweet little thing. I would be so careful with you..."

He had no intention of pushing her into anything so soon. But part of him felt hypnotized by the slow, rolling inertia of the moment, the warm, clawing desire building in his chest.

He lowered his head to press a careful kiss to her thigh. Her skin was so soft, her smell warm and comforting.

He needed to taste her. He would go insane if he didn't, surely a single open-mouthed kiss on her leg was not so unforgivable—

But when Malfoy looked up through heavy lids, he saw terror in Hermione's face.

He pulled her nightgown down, covering her body once more.

The ache in his lower stomach was painful, his arousal so insistent and blinding that it was making him see spots. But he ignored it.

“Thank you,” he said, kissing her stomach through the pale fabric of her dress.

Hermione looked relieved enough to faint. Her cheeks were faintly pink and she was staring at him still with those wide, dark eyes. He wasn’t sure if it was wishful thinking that made him perceive the beginnings of gratitude in her gaze, the faintest bloom of trust.

~

Some simple stipulations for her first morning with him.

A Dittany bath, first.

The thin floral-stitched nightgown billowed around her in the fragrant bath water. The fabric was thinner and more transparent than her dark pajamas had been, but Malfoy did his best to keep his gaze from lingering on the way the dress clung to her wet skin. He focused instead on carefully applying medicinal oil to her knuckles, massaging it into her palms.

Afterwards he had her get dressed.

“Choose based on your preference,” he said. Hermione’s usual clothing seemed selected for wartime practicality, and he wanted to break her of the habit. “On style. Not functionality. Understand?”

“Okay. Um. Do I have to undress in front of you?”

“No. You can use the bathroom, if you like.”

Hermione looked relieved. Malfoy gave her a small stack of clothing to choose from and when she emerged it was in a pale green blouse and a long wool skirt.

“Are you going to start work for the Order?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean you’re going to be a part of it.”

They went to his office together and Hermione tried to follow him to his desk—no doubt eager to peer over his shoulder and start making plans—but Malfoy shook his head. He looked meaningfully at the sofa and coffee table, where tea had already been prepared for her.

Hermione gave him a sullen look. Her hair was still a bit damp from the bath, and it left faint damp spots on her blouse. She looked perfectly petulant, all ruffled and vulnerable.

“Please?” she asked. “I just want to know the general strategy.”

But she went to sit by the coffee table. She crossed her legs, settling down onto the plush rug, and absently pulled a saucer and cup towards her.

"We had a deal," Malfoy said, sitting at his desk. He reclined, watching her. "You know I'll take care of it."

Hermione's face was less drawn than before, but her eyes were the same—dark and serious. Heavy with other people's responsibilities.

"It would help me relax," she said. "If you told me what you had planned for the Order."

"Oh, sweetheart," he said, amused. "You can't keep framing favors for the Order as favors for you. What if I catch on?"

Her gaze was tense and anxious.

"How else am I supposed to get you to do them?"

Malfoy softened.

"Hypothetically speaking, then," he said. "If I were to want to assuage your concerns with information—what would you want to know?"

Hermione perked up, as though they were back at Hogwarts and a professor had called on her.

"High level strategy," she said quickly, ticking off one finger. "Near-term timelines," she ticked off another finger, "and risk factors."

Three fingers—she raised them for emphasis.

"Did you come up with those just now?" Malfoy asked, trying not to smile. "Or were you preparing your talking points earlier?"

"We're not all brutish soldiers like you, you know," Hermione said. "Some of us have had to think on our feet to survive."

"Come now," Malfoy chided. "I think we can both agree that lack of intelligence isn't among my faults."

"Just—please?"

"What do I get if I indulge you?" he asked, crossing his legs.

"I'll talk about whatever *you* want after."

It did not escape him that they could do whatever *he* wanted at any time, given that Hermione had already agreed to do so in exchange for his Vow. But he enjoyed feeling like they were spending time together for the sake of it.

"Fine," he said. "Let's see if my answers satisfy you. High level strategy, you said? I'm tasked with mitigating damage to the Order. So there's really only two levers I have. I can try to thwart damage to the Order that's already been planned for, or I can try to steer future strategy

away from damaging the Order. The former is more difficult to tackle. If I derail attacks too often it will draw attention to our little alliance. I'll do it as often as I can, but I believe the Order will benefit most from me deprioritizing direct attacks in the months to come. ”

“Okay,” she said eagerly. She seemed pleased by the amount of thought he'd put into it. “That makes sense. Although I assume steering strategy for such a large organization will be difficult.”

“Goodness, I've never had to do anything difficult before.”

She shot him a dark look.

“How can you be so blasé about all this?” she asked. “These are lives we're talking about.”

“Being selfish is underrated.”

Hermione seemed deeply unamused by this remark.

“You know, you're still rather like the boy you were back in Hogwarts,” she sniffed. “Under all the... well.”

“Death Eater regalia?”

“I was going to say high-functioning psychopathy.”

He smiled.

“You think about Hogwarts a lot,” he observed.

“Yes. Of course.”

“Why?”

“I felt safe there. I was never alone. My friends...”

She fell into silence. Hermione's eyes were sad now, and Malfoy watched her retreat into herself.

“Do you want to discuss my other plans for the Order?” Malfoy asked after a moment. He didn't like seeing her sad. “Timelines and risk factors were the other two items you listed.”

“Right,” she said after a moment. “Go on then.”

“I expect to see a sharp decline in Order fatalities within three to four months, though we'll see some benefit before then too. Just not as dramatic. I'll have to allow some damage to go through or risk raising suspicion.”

“Three to four months is a long time,” Hermione said, looking anxious. “A lot of people could get hurt in that time...”

“If I go faster, the chance of getting caught is higher.”

"And that's the biggest risk? Getting caught as an Order ally?"

"Yes. Though I don't think it's likely. I have a long history of being a reliable servant to the Dark Regime," Malfoy said. "It should be fairly easy to avoid detection. Of course, *you* do present an additional factor. People might start to suspect that you're influencing my decisions."

This made Hermione pause for an unusual length of time. Malfoy watched her curiously, wondering what about this remark had interested her.

"I am surprised you think that possibility would cross anyone's mind," she said finally. "Why would anyone believe I could make you act on my behalf?"

"It will be obvious to anyone who sees us that I like to coddle you."

Hermione went pink and turned to look out the window, a small furrow between her eyebrows.

Malfoy watched her. She was more at ease under his observation than before; like a domesticated creature that was growing comfortable with being watched.

"So," Malfoy said, twirling a quill in his fingers. "You said we could talk about whatever *I* want now."

"Um, right. Sure. What do you want to talk about?"

"You, of course. And how you'll spend your time here."

"Doing whatever you decide for me, I would think," she said drily. "Wasn't that the—"

This line of conversation was extremely interesting to Malfoy, but his attention was abruptly drawn away when a sudden, barely perceptible chill rolled through the room.

The hairs on Malfoy's neck stood on end. He rose from his desk, and Hermione's sentence cut off into silence at his change in demeanor; she looked at him in alarm.

"Malfoy—?"

He didn't answer, instead wordlessly sent out magical charges to all the security wards through his house, felt the thrums of information return.

Dark Magic. A familiar signature. A member of his family.

Malfoy took one, careful step to put himself between Hermione and the door.

Not a moment later, the tall wooden doors of his office melted to the ground. They puddled and bubbled like acid on the floor before sinking out of view. Tar-thick Dark Magic permeated his office—the slight chill in the air had grown and was now nearly unbearably frigid, causing spiderwebs of frost to form on the glass surfaces of the windows. The daylight from outside receded out of view and shadows engulfed the room.

“Aunt,” Malfoy said, his breath misting before him. His mind worked rapidly. “How good of you to barge in uninvited.”

Bellatrix Lestrange looked less and less human every time Malfoy saw her. It was unsettling to see her outside of her own estate. Her cheekbones were more pointed and skeletal than ever, the proportions strange and animalistic. Her mane of hair looked brittle and dry, piled high on the crown of her head and streaked with grey.

Her cold, hooded eyes were white now—fogged as though she was growing blind—but Malfoy knew it to be the Dark Magic she’d suffused herself with, damaging her from the inside out. Her cloudy pupils flicked around the room, lizard-like, landing at last on Hermione.

“Come now, Draco,” she said, not looking away from Hermione. “Our doors must never be closed to family.”

Behind her, outside the door to his office, two Dementors stepped in. His aunt’s favored visiting companions. When Malfoy looked out past them, he should have been able to see his own foyer, his own sweeping staircase. But he saw almost total darkness instead. Only the closest stretch of floor was visible, and it was made of stone slabs instead of wood. Bellatrix was stepping from her home right into his; her magic had gotten stronger indeed.

“To what do I owe the visit?” Malfoy asked, looking from the Dementors to his aunt.

His hackles were raised; he hated intruders in his home. If it had been anyone else he would not have abided it. But there was always a chain of power to be respected.

And if Bellatrix had heard about Hermione, it was especially important that he control himself and the situation as much as possible.

His aunt walked to Hermione—her gait was eerily fast, spider-like, like her bones were clicked together incorrectly.

“So the rumors of your new pet are true,” she said, cocking her head to the side.

Hermione recoiled under Bellatrix’s unnerving white gaze. Bellatrix’s nostrils flared, like she could smell the fear. Then she straightened up. She looked at Malfoy.

“I admit I would have thought a Mudblood plaything beneath you, Draco. Your father would be rolling in his grave.”

“If his judgment was worth abiding by, perhaps he would not have found himself in a grave to begin with.”

That made Bellatrix laugh. Her laugh was high and unhinged—a genuine sound of amusement.

“You impudent boy,” she said. Her tone was fond now—he had always been her favorite nephew. “I suppose you are right on that front.”

She tipped her head to the side, her blank pupils sharp and assessing.

"Still. You cannot deny it is most unusual."

"Come here, Hermione," Malfoy said by way of answer. "Kneel on the floor. Show Aunt Bella how good you can be."

Hermione did as he said.

The set of her shoulders was hard and tense, and her breathing was sharp and shallow. She lowered herself awkwardly to her knees, avoiding looking directly at Bellatrix. It was clear this show of submission pleased Bellatrix; she had always been a blood hierarchy traditionalist.

"What was it they called her again?" Bellatrix asked Malfoy, grabbing Hermione's chin. She turned her face this way and that, checking every angle like she would a show dog.

"The Golden Girl."

"Ah, yes," Bellatrix purred. "The Golden Girl. Forgive me, Golden Girl—it's been years since I thought of Potter and your little trio."

Hermione stared up at Bellatrix with burning, hate-filled eyes. Bellatrix smiled, her lips stretching thin over sharp teeth. Perhaps she was indulging in the memories of all that she had done to earn the Order's hatred and fear.

She let go of Hermione's face, seemed suddenly bored of her.

"The others are already gossiping about her," she said, her attention now back to Malfoy. "But I suppose that was your intention?"

"Yes. My reputation could use a little adornment. I've become too boring recently, I think."

"Fine. But she is far too well-kept. You ought to beat her around a little, lest everyone think you dote on her."

"Let them think that. I do dote on her."

"My god," Bellatrix muttered with distaste. "Don't be vile."

"Your sensibilities have grown too delicate, aunt," Malfoy said. "She's a trophy. To be handled delicately. Stand up, Hermione."

Hermione stood. Malfoy didn't let their gazes connect, was entirely focused on managing the interaction with Bellatrix. His aunt was a fickle, violent woman, although age had softened her somewhat. It was important that she decide for herself that Hermione was a non-issue.

Malfoy reached for the chain around Hermione's neck. He drew out the signet ring from under her shirt; the metal caught what little light was in the room and glinted.

*"Torquemtia,"* Malfoy said.

Hermione's silver chain shone, then twisted in Malfoy's fingers. It tightened around Hermione's throat until the signet ring lay flat against the hollow of her neck. It was loose enough to let her breathe, but she still gasped in fear and clawed at her neck; the choker did not budge.

At the center of the chain—like a tag on a pet's collar—hung Malfoy's ring.

"Sweet, isn't she?" Malfoy said, glancing at Bellatrix. "She looks good like this. And everyone will know who she belongs to."

His aunt looked faintly repulsed, but indulgent.

"If it pleases you. Far be it from me to deny you a little fun..."

She trailed off, then tipped her head back—her unseeing eyes pointed at the ceiling. She claimed the Dark Lord still communicated to her sometimes, and Malfoy wondered if she thought she heard his voice now.

"You've worked hard for us," she finally said, looking at Malfoy once more. "You deserve to play."

Malfoy could sense that the conversation was now over, Bellatrix's favorable judgment made.

His aunt walked to the door and beckoned to her Dementors, who followed.

"Some of the other Death Eaters are speaking too loosely of you," she said. "Parade your new toy about if you like—but be sure to cut their tongues out if they speak on it. They could do with the reminder."

"I will."

Bellatrix gave Hermione a final look, her white eyes bottomless. Then she turned to Malfoy.

"I believe the Dark Lord would have wanted to see you indulge in the spoils of the war," she said to him quietly. Her face was unsettlingly tender—pained with her own brand of grief. "You were a most loyal servant to him, Draco."

"Thank you, aunt Bella," Malfoy said. "May we honor his legacy."

"May we honor his legacy," Bellatrix repeated.

There was a dark, curling onslaught of smoke, covering her and the Dementors. When it cleared, all of them were gone.

The darkness from the room slowly seeped away. Malfoy gave himself a moment for his breathing to return to steady state.

He had nearly forgotten what it felt like to be afraid—fear was an emotion he'd not experienced in years. But he would not soon forget the sight of his aunt's long, bony fingers around Hermione's jaw.

“You did well,” he said to Hermione.

Hermione threw up on the floor, looking pale and shaken.

## Chapter 11

“Are you alright?” Malfoy asked, leaning over to help her up.

Hermione was most assuredly *not* alright.

Bellatrix Lestrange was even more horrifying than the Order had suspected. One of the top leaders of the Dark regime, feared above most others, yet a rare presence on the battlefield, these days. Preferring to stay in her home and look terrifying, it seemed.

“What’s wrong with her?” Hermione asked, shivering violently.

The dementors were gone, but the aura of despair remained.

Malfoy conjured a plate of chocolate and set it on the desk, then returned to her side and tipped her chin up.

“Eat this,” he said, sliding a piece between her lips.

Hermione had just been sick and was sure her mouth was not quite clean, but Malfoy did not seem to mind. He wiped her chin with his thumb—how embarrassing—then kissed her on the nose.

“She experiments with Dark Magic,” he said, vanishing Hermione’s mess from his floor.  
“I’m sorry she came here. I didn’t think she would.”

“Why did she come?” Hermione asked, feeling faint. “Is she going to come back again?”

“I’m not entirely sure why she came. She doesn’t usually bother about things like this. But it looks like the news about you piqued her interest. I don’t think she’ll be back.”

“God,” Hermione moaned, feeling ill again.

“Easy now. Let’s get you showered. And then we can get you feeling better. Maybe we can... do something cozy?”

Hermione looked like she wasn’t sure she’d heard him correctly.

“What?”

“Do something cozy,” he repeated. “I’ve been told that’s a desirable type of milieu. For when a woman is frightened.”

“Cozy,” she repeated, sounding baffled. “For when a *woman* is frightened? That’s very sexist. Who told you that?”

“My mother. Do you want a blanket by the fireplace or not?”

“I mean. Yes, definitely.”

He snorted and summoned the chocolate from his desk, then brought it with them as they went from his office to his room.

Hermione showered, making liberal use of the many perfumed soaps and shampoos that now lined the marble shelves.

“Did you get all this stuff for me?” she asked, scrubbing a rose-scented shampoo through her hair.

Her hair was very tangled. This was the first time in a while she’d had the initiative to really groom herself.

Malfoy was silent for a half beat too long, and Hermione second-guessed herself.

“Or,” she continued. “Is it for another lady guest?”

Malfoy had surprised her by opting to stay outside the bathroom, giving her privacy. He lingered just outside the door. Still close enough to talk.

“My lady guests don’t stay in my room,” he said after a moment.

Hermione tried not to feel stung. It was just—unexpected. Malfoy was so obsessive and doting. She’d expected him to deny any contact with other women.

“Okay,” she said quietly.

She put the shampoo down.

“I was seeing some women,” he went on. “But not anymore. Just you, now.”

“I wouldn’t call this *seeing* me,” Hermione muttered. But her heart settled. “We’re hardly *dating*...”

“No. But I still have you, don’t I?”

She turned off the water and stepped out onto the teak mat, then dried herself off with a fluffy towel.

Malfoy entered the room, surprising her again. She’d expected him to continue waiting outside.

Hermione clutched the towel to herself, wary and alert. His gaze was soft and curious, trailing over her damp skin.

“Can I dry you?” he asked.

“I would feel—self-conscious.”

“Why?”

“Because that would be a lot of touching.”

He hummed in agreement.

“Please?” he asked.

She hesitated.

“Could you—grab another towel then?” she asked. “And I’ll keep holding this one...”

Malfoy did so.

He rolled up his sleeves and then lifted the new towel to her shoulders, dragged it softly over her collarbone, then her neck.

Arms, wrists, hands. Careful and exacting, his eyes focused on each part of her throughout—except when they flitted to her face, looking for her reaction.

She didn’t know what expression she was meant to be wearing. But it seemed enough for Malfoy to just look at her.

He dropped into a crouch and picked up one of her feet, holding it in his palm as he wiped her ankles dry.

Hermione balanced with a hand on his broad shoulder, and he seemed to like that very much.

“I could do this all day,” he murmured, drying her calf.

The towel moved up to her knee, then her thigh. Higher—too high—but then he placed her foot on the ground and picked up the other one, doing the same to her other leg.

Again the towel crept high. Again he stopped just short of embarrassing her.

“Turn around,” he said.

The towel Hermione held was only loosely covering her, and when she turned Malfoy simply tugged on its edge, sending the towel falling quietly to the floor.

Hermione froze, her hands tensing nervously at her sides.

This was possibly the most vulnerable she’d ever felt. Naked and only half-dry in a cavernously large marble bathroom, with Malfoy fully clothed and standing behind her. Looking.

She heard him breathe out quietly.

She heard him take a step closer to her.

The towel went to her back first, smoothing soft circles over her skin, collecting all the drops of moisture. He moved it lower then, drying the small of her back. Then she felt the towel

sweep lower, felt his fingers through the fabric as they lingered for only a moment over the curve of her bottom.

“All dry,” he said. “Sit on the bed? I’ll brush your hair.”

“I don’t know why you’d want to do that,” Hermione said. She cleared her throat. “Could I—have a robe or something?”

Malfoy looked very much like he wanted her to remain unclothed. But in the end he gave her one, although it was his own. Over-large on her, down to her calves.

She sat on his bed and he fed her another piece of chocolate.

“Feeling better than before?” he asked.

The chocolate was sweet. She chewed it slowly.

“Yes. Thank you.”

She was seated on the edge of the bed and Malfoy settled himself behind her, his legs on either side of her own. But the position was a bit awkward when he tried to gather her hair in his hands

“Come here,” he said, pulling her onto his lap.

Hermione was getting more used to sitting on him. She shifted her weight a little, trying to get more comfortable, then stayed obediently still as he ran a brush through her hair.

“I feel like a doll,” she said to him after a moment.

He laughed a little. At her back, his chest vibrated with the sound.

“Yes,” he said. “My doll.”

“Men shouldn’t play with dolls.”

“Now who’s sexist?”

She couldn’t help but laugh.

“You’re right. That was wrong of me.”

“Maybe if I’d had dolls growing up,” Malfoy said, carefully brushing through a tangled section. “I wouldn’t need you so much now. Such a pretty thing, you know. And all mine to play with.”

She turned to see his expression. His remark was unsettling, but his tone was calm and warm. And when she saw his face, he met her eyes with a smile of amusement.

She turned back around. After a while, holding her shoulders up became exhausting. She leaned back a bit, resting against his chest.

Malfoy kissed the top of her head.

“I love when you rest on me,” he said. “It does things to me.”

“Probably related to your fondness for control,” Hermione said drily. “Something in that general psychological area.”

“Plausible.”

“Do you know why you’re like that?” she asked.

“Fond of control?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He’d gotten most of the tangles out of her hair. The brush passed smoothly through her curls, breaking each section into little puffs. She would have to explain curly hair treatment to him later.

“I just like it,” he said. “Some people like blindfolds. Or fishnet stockings. I like being in charge.”

“So it’s a sexual preference?”

In response, Malfoy wound his fingers into her hair, gently fistling it at the back of her head. He tugged lightly, forcing her face to tip back, eyes up at the ceiling.

Hermione’s breath caught. Her heart stuttered with alarm. She couldn’t see Malfoy, and something about that activated prey instinct in her. He was out of sight, yet she knew his attention was entirely on her.

“At least a little sexual,” Malfoy said quietly. “Like this, for instance. Pulling your head back like this makes me feel... good.”

He pulled her head back a little more, arching her neck, and his face came into view. Upside down above her, his grey eyes intense. She stared at him as the fingers in her hair tightened, as though he wanted to do much more than pull her hair.

But Malfoy just gently unwound his hand from her hair, then returned to brushing it.

“But this feels good, too,” he said, and she could hear the smile in his voice. “Brushing your hair. Taking care of you.”

Hermione didn’t say anything. She didn’t know what to say.

“What feels good for you?” Malfoy asked after a moment.

“I... really don’t think my preferences are the ones we’re optimizing for here.”

“I’d like to know.”

She pressed her lips together, embarrassed by the line of questioning, and unsure how she was meant to respond.

She heard him laugh a little.

“Shy? How about this...”

He carefully put down the brush, then reached around her shoulders to place his hand on her neck. Slowly, Malfoy wrapped his long fingers securely around her throat.

“How does this make you feel, sweetheart?” he asked.

Hermione didn’t dare move. She had never had someone grab her around the neck before, and it felt like staying very still was her most survival-minded option.

Malfoy was not using very much pressure at all, but he was strong. His hold was firm without trying, and she suspected that if she attempted to break out of it, she would not be successful.

“Scared,” she finally forced herself to say, when it was clear he was waiting for her to answer

It came out as a whisper, more from fear than from the pressure of his hand.

He hummed sympathetically, then pulled her slightly closer to him, still by her throat.

She leaned into the movement, not wanting him to accidentally choke her. Her shoulder bumped his chest, and he brought her closer still so that she was leaning fully against him, her face turned up and their eyes locked.

Malfoy looked intently down at her.

His eyes were nearly black. His mouth was serious.

“I don’t mean to scare you,” he said. She felt his fingers flex slightly, readjusting his hold. “I think if you knew how I felt, you wouldn’t be so scared.”

Hermione felt her lips tremble with the force of trying not to cry.

Malfoy’s expression flickered. He seemed unhappy at the sight of her distress.

He lifted a hand to her cheek, soothing her, then moved to press his thumb gently against her bottom lip. As though to calm the trembling with his own hand.

“It’s okay,” he said quietly. He kissed her nose. “The same things that scare you about me are what make us a perfect fit.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said hoarsely.

“You’re scared,” Malfoy said. “Because you’re weak.”

A long beat of silence, as Hermione felt herself automatically tense with anger.

He had no idea the things she'd been through. The horrors she'd seen. She was *not weak*. The very fact that she was even still alive was a testament to her strength.

But Malfoy seemed to know what she was thinking. He shook his head, his eyes drifting down to her mouth. She felt him press his thumb more firmly against it.

"This is something the Order never understood," he murmured. "Weakness isn't about character. You're very brave, darling. But you're weak where it matters most. You are weak in *power*."

Hermione just looked angrily up at him, trying to breathe, trying to hold onto her anger instead of succumbing to the part of her that was saying *he's right, he's right, he's right*—

"You're scared," he continued. "Because you are not powerful enough to ensure your own safety. And you're scared of *me* for that same reason."

He was gazing at her face, his eyebrows drawn slightly together, his jaw tight. It felt strange to see him so affected by her, when he was the one with his hand around her throat.

His thumb toyed lightly with her bottom lip, pressing it down to part her lips, and she saw the moment his eyes dropped to look at his hand against her mouth. The way his own mouth parted slightly in response, as though involuntarily, and the way his eyelids grew heavy.

"I'm a good fit for you," he said. There was something almost pleading in his voice. "I promise. Because I can do *all of those things* for you. I can keep you safe. I can make sure you never hurt again."

Hermione swallowed and he must have felt it under his fingers—his hand flexed a little.

He lowered his face just a little, putting them even closer together.

Their faces were already very close, and now they were nearly touching. Breathing the same air. Feeling the same vibrating atoms in the tiny sliver of space between them. Malfoy's mouth hovered just over hers. She felt his breaths on her lips, felt his fingers around her neck shake just a little.

Was he going to kiss her?

He hadn't, so far. It had felt like some sort of rule.

"What do you think?" he asked quietly, resting his forehead against hers.

His eyes were such a strange color—pale and grey and crisp. They looked into her now. She wondered if he was thinking about the color of her eyes, or if this wasn't like that for him. If she was just a thing to possess.

"That's—a lot of reasons you'd be a good fit for me," she said.

"It is, isn't it?"

His lazy smile looked especially sharp, from this close.

Hermione swallowed. Every time she did, Malfoy's fingers twitched around her neck.

"And..." she began uncertainly. "Do you think I'm a good fit for you?"

She wasn't sure what made her say it. Partially to play this role for him, maybe. To talk to him like he seemed to want her to. To be a companion to him, the way he wanted her to.

Or maybe she was curious.

"You are a *perfect fit for me*," he said hoarsely. His breathing was slow and steady, skating down her face—she felt it on her chest, going down the top of her robe. His eyes were black. "Perfect."

"Why?"

"Sweet," he said, with such intensity that his voice came out agonized. He touched her cheek. "So very sweet. Needy. Brilliant."

He brought his palm to the center of her chest, against her sternum.

"A kind heart. A treasure worth protecting. Even if the only power I have to offer is dark... it's all I have. But I can still give it to you."

There was barely any space between them anyway.

So Hermione could be forgiven, she thought, for kissing him first.

## Chapter 12

Malfoy made a broken noise against her mouth.

She had surprised him, it seemed. His hand dropped from her throat as though in shock, then—a moment later—rose to seize her jaw.

A wild sense of relief rocked Hermione. Finally, *finally*, the uncertainty was over—

Malfoy seemed caught between ecstasy and urgency. He pulled her closer by her face—his hand was so large, the fingers spanning from her cheek to her throat—he was easily powerful enough to guide her however he wanted. To bring her as close to him as he could.

Draco Malfoy was a good kisser, and what a strange fact that was.

His mouth moved against hers with exacting, adoring hunger. Desperate for her. He touched her cheek, her chin, dragged her sharply closer by the hips and pressed her lower body to his stomach.

It wasn't enough for him. Hermione felt his touches turn frantic, felt one of his hands snake to the back of her head and tangle in her curls. He was whispering beautiful, unintelligible things to her, against her mouth—biting down on her bottom lip.

Malfoy pulled Hermione's head back as he'd done before, his hand in her hair. His hand tightened on her hip, she felt each of his fingers clench against her.

Physically powerful—*too much*.

Capable of holding her down by force, and Hermione was in no way sure he would restrain himself from doing so. It would take him no effort at all to throw her onto her back, to get on top of her and carelessly use his knee to force apart her thighs—he was more than strong enough to do it, could pry her open like that, like a shell with something he wanted inside of it—

Hermione jerked away in a sudden panic. She shoved Malfoy in the chest, scratching his neck, trying to get him off of her.

He let go instantly, still breathing hard.

She scooted away from him on the bed, putting distance between them, and Malfoy watched her pull away from him, his eyes dark and starving.

“Hermione?” he said hoarsely, breathless. “Come back—please—“

Hermione was too overwhelmed to respond, and when Malfoy tried slowly to reach for her hand, she snatched her fingers away and moved further back on his bed.

Malfoy closed his eyes and let out a low, ragged noise of pain.

She could see his hard physical reaction to their kiss, right there in his lap.

Hermione dragged her gaze back to his face. Malfoy touched his mouth, his face disbelieving.

“You kissed me,” he said.

“It was an impulse. I don’t know why I did that—“

“Why did you stop?”

“Because you grabbed me!” Hermione stammered wildly. “You grabbed my face—your hands are *huge*—”

She clamped her mouth shut, feeling humiliated.

She sounded *so stupid*.

Malfoy had had his hand around her throat not five minutes before the kiss—and now she was trying to say she was *surprised* by his behavior? That she had initiated the kiss but was too foolish to predict how he’d react?

Malfoy didn’t seem to consider this line of logic. He looked mostly like he was trying to soothe a wild animal from sprinting away.

“Okay,” he pleaded. “That’s alright. I won’t grab you.”

“Good!” Hermione said, her voice cracking. She felt unhinged. “It makes me feel like you’re going to lose control.”

“I won’t do that.”

He licked his lips. Then, gently:

“I can be soft.”

She just looked at him. Hating herself.

“Would you like that?” he asked. “I could be that way for you. Slow, and careful...”

“Don’t grab my hair.”

“I won’t.”

“Promise.”

In answer, Malfoy put his hands behind his back. Like he was handcuffed.

“Look. I promise.”

“And you won’t move your arms?” Hermione asked.

“I won’t.”

Hermione just looked at him for a long moment. Then she moved forward, a bit closer, slow and alert.

Malfoy watched her approach. He seemed to be taking extreme care not to move his arms by even a centimeter, as though he truly were tied up.

She made sure he stayed still, then rose onto her knees, putting their faces at the same height.

“Closed mouth,” Hermione said, eyes narrowing nervously at him.

“Anything you want.”

Hermione nodded again.

She leaned in, eyes on his lips. She hesitated—her eyes flitted up to meet his. They were the shattered grey of mist, of clouds over the sea—wrecked with tenderness for her. She took a little breath and leaned the rest of the way in.

At the contact, Malfoy’s eyes flickered shut instantly. He made a quiet groan of relief.

Hermione pulled back and he swayed slightly.

“Better?” Malfoy breathed, licking his lips.

“Yes,” Hermione said. She was relieved. “Better.”

“Can I have another?”

She kissed him again, another chaste peck on the lips. Malfoy’s arms still stayed safely behind him and so Hermione lingered close this time instead of pulling all the way back.

Malfoy exhaled slowly, his breath hot on her lips. He leaned his forehead lightly on her. His eyes were squeezed shut, the serious lines of his eyebrows drawn together.

“You make me *so happy*,” he whispered.

“Closed mouth,” she reminded him, and Malfoy closed his mouth at once.

She couldn’t help but smile at his easy acquiescence. She kissed him once more on the mouth and felt his lips curve into an answering smile below hers.

~

Malfoy was, it seemed, capable of controlling his desire.

He didn’t ask her for a fourth kiss, only kissed her once more on the cheek then stood and helped her off the bed too.

"You should get clothes on," Malfoy said. His eyes lingered on his robe around her, at his initials—DLM, in silver thread—embroidered on the fabric lying over her heart.

"Okay," Hermione said. "Do you have clothes for me?"

"In the closet. Can I dress you?"

"Alright."

His closet was large and well-lit. So it was easy to see, as soon as Hermione stepped in, the chilling aspect of Malfoy's Death Eater robes at the head of the room.

She froze in the doorway.

The robes were pitch black and hung, as though on display, behind a thick glass wall. And above the robes sat the pale, terrible visage of Malfoy's Death Eater mask.

Together, it looked like a specter of a Death Eater standing before her, trapped behind a window.

The mask was the worst part. The cheeks gaunt and inhuman, the eye holes carved out—black and empty.

Hermione could imagine how it must feel to be on the floor, kneeling before a Death Eater wearing that mask.

How it would feel to look up and beg, to search those hollow eyes for mercy—and to be met with nothing but darkness instead.

Malfoy noticed Hermione's change in demeanor. He looked at her and then followed her gaze to the robes.

He gestured with his hand and the glass in front of the robes turned to wood, obscuring them from Hermione's view.

"I'm sorry. I'll move it somewhere else today."

Hermione looked away from the wood where the robes had hung, blinking quickly. She couldn't bring herself to look at Malfoy, at the face behind the mask.

"Okay," she said, her voice pinched. "Thank you."

"We can change anything you want about the room," he said after a moment. "The robes will be gone. Anything else you'd like?"

"Um..."

Decoration was not exactly at the forefront of Hermione's mind. But she remembered how cold and soulless Malfoy's room felt, and she thought of what she'd want instead. The girls' dormitory at Hogwarts had been so warm and lovely. She'd owned a soft red blanket, stitched

with a Gryffindor patch. There had been a lavender stuffed side pillow too, and scented candles... what had happened to all her beautiful things, after the battle?

"I don't know," she said quietly, not looking at him. "Anything is fine."

Malfoy was silent.

After a while she heard him start to look through her clothes, which had been moved to a wall of his closet. There was the gentle clink of a hanger as he chose something.

"Come here," Malfoy said.

He was holding a dress for her. Knee-length.

Malfoy carefully undid the tie on Hermione's robe, turning her away when he was done. He slid the robe off her shoulders. He'd already seen her naked back before, after the shower, so Hermione was less tense this time. She was relieved that her chest, at least, was hidden from his view.

Malfoy nudged her arms up so that he could slip the dress over her. It had a wide, full skirt that fell over her hips. Malfoy adjusted it carefully, and Hermione touched the fabric. A soft eggplant color, stitched with small vines.

The back of her dress was still unzipped. She felt Malfoy run a finger slowly up her spine; then he dropped a tender kiss there, at the nape of her neck, before zipping up the dress.

Hermione waited to make sure he was all done. Her back was still to him, she felt him place one large palm on either side of her hips, securing her in his hold. Malfoy leaned her body gently back, so that her back was against his hard chest and stomach.

"Pick something for the room today," he said quietly. "Could you do that for me?"

He slid his hand to her stomach, pressed her lovingly against him.

"Yes," Hermione said. "Alright."

"Thank you," he said, and kissed the top of her head.

~

A scented candle felt like a safe, unobtrusive choice.

And Hermione didn't think she'd seen any candles around Malfoy's house; that could be something new she brought to his home?

They ate a late lunch together, lazy and comfortable. He hadn't wanted to eat at the dining table, and Hermione privately agreed. It would have felt so—stiff.

Instead, she lounged on her stomach on one of the long, velvety sofas in Malfoy's formal living room. She picked from a plate of cheese and fruits and small savory scones, wiping her

fingers on a napkin Malfoy offered to her after every few bites.

He had black coffee and a plate of what looked like grilled fish and some vegetables on the side table next to him.

"That looks much more well-rounded than your meals back at the safe house," Hermione noted approvingly, propping herself up a bit to better see his plate. "Cod?"

"Branzino. And some broccolini."

He'd asked her if she wanted the same but the memory of her queasiness earlier in the day haunted her. Small bites seemed safer.

She settled back down and popped a grape in her mouth.

"Fish and dark greens are very nutritious," she hummed. "Lots of fatty acids and calcium."

He smiled.

"Worried about my nutritional intake?"

"I'm a Healer," she sniffed. "I don't like seeing anyone malnourished."

She turned the page on the little paperback novella Malfoy had given her to read.

"Is it because you thought I was too thin before?" Malfoy asked. It sounded like he was smirking.

"I never said that," she said primly, not looking up from her book.

"You didn't have to. I know exactly what you like."

"Oh, stop it," Hermione said irritably, kicking him with one socked foot.

Malfoy laughed and caught her ankle, and she jerked her foot haughtily out of his grip. He pretended to lunge for her in earnest and she squealed and kicked him again.

After lunch, she told him about her thoughts on a candle for his room.

"Just one?" he asked.

"Yes. I think just one is nice? Sort of comforting. Instead of a row of identical decorations, you know?"

"I understand," he said. "What kind do you want?"

"I'm not sure. Anything is fine, I think."

And that was how Hermione ended up kneeling by the coffee table, examining a row of eight candles that Malfoy had had someone procure and lay out for her to choose from.

"I wouldn't fancy being a servant here," she said, holding up two candles and looking between them. One white and one dark orange, in dappled glass. Very beautiful. "Having to run out and buy a bunch of candles on short notice. Must be rather tiring going after your whims."

"I promise you they are well-compensated for the great burden of my whims," Malfoy said, leaning forward in his armchair to better see the options. He rested his elbows on his knees and picked up a red candle in a carved metal holder. "What sort of criteria is most important in a candle?"

His face was serious with interest. Hermione couldn't help but laugh.

"Do you not have anything better to do than pick a candle with me?" she asked. "Domesticity doesn't exactly seem on brand for you."

"I can be domestic," he said, looking offended.

"Alright, fine. I mostly want one that smells good. And I like the ones that come in these glass tins..."

They narrowed it down to three. A pale vanilla candle in an oval container, a spiced orange cinnamon in one of the rippled glass ones that Hermione had liked, and a pine-scented square candle encased in green glass.

Hermione was holding the pine one up for Malfoy to smell again when she heard the main entrance door open and close, and then the chatter of two voices.

She lowered her arm nervously as the voices became clearer.

"—told you my mother wants you to wear the blue silk tie," came Pansy's voice. "And those silver cufflinks? You remember—you wore them to that Ministry dinner—"

When Pansy saw Hermione, her voice abruptly cut off.

Just behind Pansy was Nott. His eyes fell on Hermione and he stopped walking as well.

They were both dressed nicely—Pansy in a grey silk pantsuit of some kind and Nott in a brown jacket and trousers. Pansy's hair was shiny and coiffed, gold jewelry glittering at her neck and wrists. Her lips were bright rouge.

"Draco," Pansy said, sounding scandalized. Her voice echoed slightly in the high-ceilinged foyer, reverberating around the living room. "Out here in the living room—really?"

"Hermione wanted a candle," Malfoy said. He gently guided Hermione's wrist up a little, so he could better smell the dark green candle she was holding. "This one's lovely, sweetheart."

"The engagement party is today," Pansy said, disbelieving. "Theo's parents will be here—*my* parents—good Lord. Are you planning on having her out all day?"

Malfoy looked coolly up at her.

"Theo," Pansy said, sounding faint. "Say something."

Nott paused. His eyes flicked momentarily to Hermione.

"Pansy's parents are traditional," Nott said to Malfoy. "It might be upsetting for them to see someone of... unconventional blood status. Tonight."

Malfoy took a final sniff of the pine candle. He cocked his head, as though considering its merits as compared to the others, and then sat up.

He turned his gaze to Pansy and Nott, but he didn't speak.

Silence stretched on, and then on some more. Wire-taut.

"It would only be for tonight," Pansy finally said, clearly unable to endure the tension. She cleared her throat nervously. "Of course—we only meant for tonight. That's fair, isn't it? I just don't want my mother to—"

"Come here," Malfoy interrupted. "I think you just don't understand what we're doing."

Pansy looked like a deer in headlights. Nott closed his eyes.

"Right. Of course," Pansy said, speaking quickly and in a falsely cheery voice. She stepped forward and Nott did as well. "But I only have a moment—I have to review the arrangements for the party. Theo wanted me to try on some of the new Italian bracelets... and the florist—"

Malfoy took the pine candle from Hermione and held it out to Pansy.

"We're choosing a candle. See?"

Pansy's red lipsticked mouth twitched with anxiety. At her sides, her fingers clenched.

Malfoy's eyes were stony and unmoving from hers, and she seemed to wither.

"Okay, I get it," Pansy snapped quietly. "I'm sorry, alright? Obviously you can have whoever you want here, it's your house, Draco—I didn't mean to imply—"

"Take the candle, Pansy."

Malfoy's voice was frigid.

Pansy did as he said.

Malfoy leaned back in his seat. He toyed absently with a curl of Hermione's hair, winding it gently around his index finger before letting it spiral loose. His touch was soft and relaxed—so at odds with the rest of the situation.

Nott stared at the movement.

"Smell it," Malfoy said coolly to Pansy. "Hermione is trying to choose a candle. You should help her pick."

Pansy hesitated, then smelled the candle.

"It's fine," she said quietly, moving to put it back down on the table. But Malfoy lifted his fingers and an invisible force seized Pansy by the wrist—her arm froze in mid-air, like a hand was gripping it.

"Come on, Draco—" Nott began.

"Give the candle to your fiancé," Malfoy said calmly to Pansy. "Go on."

Nott took the candle from her and Pansy's arm went free. She brought it close to her chest, looking furious and shaken.

"Now, Theodore," Malfoy said. "Your turn. What do *you* think of the candle?"

Nott's jaw clenched. He lifted the candle to his nose, his dark eyes never leaving Malfoy's face.

"It's nice," he said quietly.

"What does it smell like?"

"Trees."

Malfoy hummed thoughtfully.

"They think it's *nice*," he said to Hermione, gathering her hair in his hands, combing his fingers lightly through her curls. "They think it smells like trees. But that's not very helpful to us, is it?"

"No, it is," Hermione said quickly. She was starting to become worried that Malfoy was going to make them do something like *eat* the candles. "It's very helpful. Thank you both—"

"You're happy with their answers?" Malfoy asked.

"Yes," Hermione answered at once. "I'm happy."

Malfoy leaned back.

"Hermione is happy," he said to Pansy and Nott. "Isn't that lucky?"

He did not phrase it like a question. But they answered anyway.

"Yes," Pansy muttered.

Nott was looking away, out the window. But he nodded.

"Good," Malfoy said. "So we're all in agreement."

Malfoy picked up the vanilla candle and smelled it carefully, as though the most important thing in the world was that he and Hermione choose the correct scent.

“What time is everyone arriving for the party, Pansy?” Malfoy asked without looking at her.

“Seven,” Nott replied, when Pansy didn’t speak up. “Everyone’s arriving at seven. We’re very grateful to you for hosting—“

“Seven,” Malfoy repeated, ignoring the rest of Nott’s sentence. He picked up Hermione’s hand and kissed her knuckles. “Did you hear that, darling? Plenty of time for you to pick your favorite. And once everyone gets here, we can see if they like your new candle too.”

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Notes

CW in endnotes

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Malfoy watched dispassionately as Pansy and Theodore finally left. Nott's hand rested comfortingly on Pansy's shoulders, which were shaking.

"Sorry about that," Malfoy said, rubbing his palm lightly over Hermione's back. The fabric of her dress bunched lightly under his long fingers; her skin was soft and warm. "What do you think about this one?"

He put the vanilla candle in front of her. Hermione was seated between his knees on the rug. She had been watching Pansy and Theodore; she tore her eyes away from the staircase and back down at the candle.

"Um..."

She hesitated, seemingly preoccupied. Then she looked at him.

"We don't really have to go to that party, do we?" she asked.

"Mm. I'm afraid we do."

"Don't you think it will be—uncomfortable?"

"Why would it be? We'll have cocktails. Tiny, fiddly canapés."

"What about Pansy's parents?"

"I promise you that Pansy is, at this very moment, having a panicked Floo call with her mother." Malfoy toyed with a lock of Hermione's hair. "There's nothing to worry about. Everything will be fine."

Hermione cleared her throat and Malfoy smiled at the sweet, nervous sound of it.

"I still don't want to go," she said.

"Sorry, kitten," Malfoy said, amused. "I do make some decisions."

Hermione made a face. But she was a good girl and didn't protest further.

She picked up the orange spiced candle and lifted it to the light, so the amber glass caught the glimmers from the chandelier.

“I really like this one,” she said after a moment.

Malfoy could tell. He knew by the way she held it so tightly, by the way she brought it close to her chest when she lowered her hand.

“Me too,” he said. “Is it your favorite?”

“I think so. It’ll be good for your room, right? Add some warmth?”

Her voice was oddly uncertain and Malfoy wondered if she was unaccustomed to making decisions that involved choosing things for her own enjoyment.

“Such a good idea,” he said. “Why don’t we go find somewhere to put it.”

~

Hermione tried the candle in a few different spots before finding one she liked. Malfoy dropped into an armchair and watched her, his legs lazily crossed and his jaw propped on two fingers.

He had never been one for decorating. It was really rather pleasant, watching Hermione bustle around, trying to pick the best place for her candle.

She put it on the dresser, then her nightstand, then the marble ledge over the fireplace. Then, finally, on the glossy black table in front of the wall of windows.

She took a step back and tipped her head to the side.

“There,” Hermione declared, smiling. “Perfect.”

“Yeah? You like it there?”

“Yes.”

Malfoy lifted his hand and the candle’s wick sprung to life, illuminating the dappled golden-red container. Hermione made a delighted sound.

“Very beautiful,” Malfoy said.

She stared raptly at the little candle, her smile beaming. The light of the orange candle danced in her eyes.

Outside the windows, the sun was setting. A cold, wintry evening was settling over the estate like a black and white cat curling into place. But inside here it was warm and smelled like cinnamon. Hermione glowed like an angel in the warm candlelight.

Malfoy wanted her closer; he extended his hand. After a moment, Hermione stepped forward to his armchair and leaned her cheek into his palm. It came so naturally to her.

"You're so sweet," he said softly, cradling her face. "How did you get like this?"

"I don't know," she said. He smoothed a circle on her cheek with his thumb. "How did you become the way you are?"

"I took the Dark Mark too young," he answered. "And my father beat me with a closed fist. So that my scars would be in the shape of the family crest, on his ring."

Malfoy didn't usually talk about such things. The memories didn't even really cause him pain; they were just—private. But he was lazily content right now. His words were slurred with the purring, cat-like satisfaction of having her so close to him.

Hermione looked at him for a long moment. Her eyes were wide and dark.

"With this ring?" she asked, touching her throat.

"Mm," Malfoy hummed in the affirmative.

Hermione tried to straighten up.

"How old were—"

But Malfoy clicked his tongue, displeased that she had stopped relaxing into his touch. Hermione exhaled irritably and finally acquiesced, resting her cheek back in his palm.

"I suppose everyone has an origin story," she said.

He smiled.

"Yes. I'm trite through and through, I'm afraid."

That made her laugh a little. She turned her face into his hand, and Malfoy's heart thrummed.

~

If it had been up to Malfoy, he probably wouldn't have attended the Parkinson-Nott engagement fête. He certainly wouldn't have hosted it.

But although there were very few people in this world who could give him a direct order, the number—sadly—wasn't zero. In this case, the directive had come from the very top.

The Commander had plans for the engagement ball.

For the most part, the plan was strategic and made sense—it was the perfect opportunity to get the wizarding world's most influential people together. Prominent pureblood families and senior Ministry officials alike would be rubbing shoulders tonight, and the hope was that *one of them* might have the wand that the Commander was so desperately seeking.

They had been searching for nearly three years. No results yet.

But though the plan was rooted in logical strategy, Malfoy was increasingly aware that the Dark Regime's leader seemed to be losing a grip on reality more and more these days, disappearing instead into memories and the foggy vistas of the past. Their last conversation about this party had been an unsettling one.

*"Who else will attend? The Prewetts?"*

*"The Prewetts will be there, yes," Malfoy said. "And the Zabinis, the Rosiers. Minister Umbridge will attend, as well as Head Auror Rognus."*

*"Very good. And... the couple. Parkinson and Nott—how are they?"*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"Are they happy together?"*

*"I don't know. Does it matter?"*

*"Engagements are a beautiful thing..."*

*"I suppose so."*

*"They were in your year at Hogwarts, were they not? Old friends are important. The past is all we have, sometimes..."*

Malfoy couldn't help but wonder if power would soon be changing hands once more. But that wasn't something to worry about tonight.

"Can I choose your dress for the party?" Malfoy asked Hermione.

"Mm. Sure."

Malfoy stripped her down in his closet, keeping her chest turned away from him. Her last bit of modesty—he didn't mind letting her hold onto it. He held up a few different dresses against the bare skin of her back, trying to decide which he liked best.

"Do I ever get to choose what you wear?" Hermione asked.

Malfoy smiled, endlessly charmed by her.

"My wardrobe is significantly less fun than yours," he said. "But maybe I'll let you play with it later."

Malfoy held up a green dress against her back and she twisted to look at it.

“No Slytherin colors,” she said, swatting it away.

Malfoy snorted but replaced the Slytherin green with a slightly more tempered olive. Hermione batted it away again, giggling this time.

Malfoy smiled, but caught her wrist firmly in his hand. He took a step closer and pinned it to her hip.

“Don’t fuss,” he said into Hermione’s ear.

She let him put the dress on her.

It was elegant, girlish—conservative. The skirt was wide and soft. Malfoy turned her so she could see herself in the closet mirror.

“You look like a princess,” he said, gazing at her reflection.

“What a beautiful dress,” Hermione murmured, looking into the mirror. She smoothed the skirt with splayed fingers. “It’s so odd to have different things to wear every day. I only had three shirts back in the safe house, you know.”

“A crime.”

Malfoy kissed her on the temple then went to select a set of dress robes for himself.

“I’m not that fussy about clothes,” Hermione said from behind him. He heard the sounds of her ruffling out the skirt, trying to get it to lie straight. “Just so you know. I don’t need a lot—it might actually be a bit easier for me, day to day, not having to choose from too many options.”

“Princesses need gowns,” Malfoy said, trying to hide the smile from his voice. She was so sweet. “And anyway, I’ll choose for you.”

“Because you’re the prince?” came her sing-song, teasing voice.

“No. I’m the dragon—remember?”

“Prince, dragon. All different spins on the same anti-feminist archetype, I’m afraid.”

Malfoy smiled. He took his shirt off, then his trousers. He stood in his briefs, unclasping his watch to replace it with one more fitting for the evening. He glanced up at the mirror to find Hermione watching him curiously in the reflection.

Malfoy winked and she turned pink and looked away.

“I have some shoes for you,” Malfoy asked, shrugging on a new shirt. “On those shelves over there—yes, right next to the coats. The black velvet ones on the top shelf.”

She tried them on. The heels were low but the shoes were new and Malfoy hoped they wouldn’t be too uncomfortable.

"Feel okay?" he asked, zipping up his trousers.

"Yes," she said, extending her ankle in front of her experimentally. She rotated her foot, letting the slim gold fastening on the shoe catch the light. "Pretty."

"Good. I'll wear black shoes too—we can match."

Hermione laughed. Malfoy smiled at her, then peered into the mirror and ran a hand through his hair. It had gotten mussed as he changed.

"You seem almost normal right now," Hermione said. "Getting ready for a party like this."

"I'm very normal," Malfoy said. "I get ready for parties all the time. There's some kind of tedious soirée every fortnight or so. You could have accompanied me to many of them, if we'd been together sooner."

Hermione laughed.

"And in what universe, pray tell, would we have been together sooner?"

"A more pleasurable one, I should think," Malfoy murmured, buttoning his collar.

"I regret to inform you that without forcible abduction, you'd have no shot with me at all," Hermione sniffed, smoothing her skirt out. "I would never date a Death Eater."

"I know. Maybe I'd have waited until the war was over to pursue you. Hopefully by then you'd have forgotten all about our opposing sides, and would be more open to my rakish charm."

"Ha. And how would you charm me, in this very optimistic alternate reality?"

"I'd orchestrate some chance encounters. Polite conversation, nothing untoward. I'd probably mention books..."

She smiled.

"Books is smart. And would you bring flowers?"

"Of course. What kind are your favorite?"

"Garden roses."

"Garden roses it is."

Hermione laughed.

"Okay," she said slowly. "And then, I think..."

"Yes?"

“You’d leave me alone and never talk to me again,” Hermione said quickly, dodging out of his grip and letting out a breathless shriek of laughter when Malfoy caught her and dragged her back to him.

She giggled uncontrollably as he caught her jaw, holding her face so she looked at herself in the mirror.

“You’re mine in this universe,” he said, squeezing her cheeks lightly so that her lips popped into a little kissing pout. “And in every other universe too. Say it.”

“No,” she giggled, twisting in his grasp and licking his palm so he would let go of her.

“Spoiled girl. Let’s go to this party.”

~

The engagement party was being held in a distant, magically separated wing of the house. Malfoy was not the kind to take security lightly. There were meters and meters of defensive wards, of runes carved into marble floors; the last thing he wanted was for guests to be able to wander from the party into the main house.

He had important things here. He had Hermione.

The walk to the entertaining hall was long, and Hermione seemed to grow more nervous as they neared the party.

She was blissfully unaware of the crackling curses carved into the marble under her feet, the protective Dark Magic so powerful that Malfoy could see its aura. Blood of failed assassins had whet the spells in these floors—probably Hermione would be happier not knowing that fact.

“Do I have to talk to people?” she asked, wrapping her arms around herself. “Will they try to talk to me?”

“They might. You don’t have to respond unless you want to.”

“Do we have to stay long?”

“No. I just need to show up and talk to some people. Don’t worry.”

“I feel sick,” she said. “Look at me—I’m all dressed up. I look like a normal *guest*. What if word gets back to the Order, and they think I’ve joined the Dark regime?”

Malfoy laughed.

"Somehow I don't think anybody will think you defected," he said. "Just relax, darling. Everyone knows you're here by force. You're a prisoner. Just enjoy yourself."

Malfoy pulled her hand to him and kissed the center of her palm.

Hermione's fingers were shaking, so very slightly. Another Dittany soak needed soon. Malfoy examined her fingers then gave them a little squeeze.

"Don't worry so much," he said, meeting her brown eyes. "It will be fun."

"How on earth do you figure *fun*?" she whispered disbelievingly.

Her voice had gone automatically quieter, as they neared the doors that led to the party. The sound of the fourteen piece band wafted through the heavy wooden doors.

"I don't know," Malfoy responded in a mock whisper. "We could get drunk."

"Don't you *dare* get drunk," Hermione said at once, alarmed. "I've no idea what kind of drunk you are and I am very uninterested in finding out—"

They stopped in front of the doors.

Malfoy brought a finger to her chin and lifted it up.

"You'll be fine."

He waved open the doors.

The party was loud. All the sounds washed over them at once.

Chatter, laughter, violins and clinking glasses—and the room was dazzlingly bright, especially after the comparatively dim light of the hallway. Light radiated off the crystal chandeliers, the sconces on the wall, the gold leaf on the wallpapers. The gleaming marble floors reflected it all, the smooth surface as sparkling as glass.

Hermione lifted her forearm to her eyes, clearly overwhelmed. Generally speaking, Malfoy didn't advise obscuring one's own vision upon entering a new room full of people. But Hermione didn't need to maintain a soldier's vigilance—that's what he was for.

Malfoy cast an eye around the room, keeping one hand at the small of Hermione's back. The air was cool and perfumed, the ceiling high—good conditions for maintaining alertness, for full visibility.

There were over two hundred guests in attendance. The room was bright with gaiety, with tipsy laughter. The men wore gleaming black-lapeled dress robes and the women wore glittering brocade Rococo dresses, a style that had become fashionable again among high-brow purebloods.

Dotted among them were the Death Eaters.

They wore severe black dress robes, embroidered with a curling silver snake on the left sleeve, just over where their Marks were tattooed. The men were serious faced, moving about the room with cold, calculating eyes—hunting ravens in a swarm of chickadees. They alone shared Malfoy's same military awareness for their surroundings. As Malfoy and Hermione entered the crowd, they alone turned first.

Aunt Bella had been right. Word of Hermione *had* spread among the ranks. None of the Death Eaters looked surprised by her presence, though their gazes held varying measures of curiosity or disdain. They looked at Hermione's dress and slippers, the tentative way she held Malfoy's proffered arm. His trophy pet, stolen right from the heart of the Order.

Some of the Death Eaters looked impressed. Others masked their disgust. Malfoy determined no immediate threat either way.

One of the Death Eaters—Dolohov—separated from a group of guests, lifting a hand in greeting.

“General,” he said, striding forward. He took Malfoy’s hand. “There you are. Nice event, mate—champagne’s the good stuff.”

Dolohov glanced at Hermione, seemed to be trying to decide if he needed to greet her or not.

“Say hello,” Malfoy said.

“Oh,” Hermione said, looking at Dolohov. “Hello.”

Malfoy couldn’t help but laugh; even Dolohov looked amused.

“Not you, sweetheart,” Malfoy said.

“Good evening, Granger,” Dolohov said.

He turned back to Malfoy.

“The men are looking through the wands now,” he reported.

“Anything yet?”

“No. It’s taking a while, there’s a lot to go through. Probably nearly three hundred people here.”

Malfoy nodded. He scanned the room.

Theodore and Pansy stood near the center of the hall, laughing amidst a cheerful crowd of guests. Pansy was in her element, wrapped in a taffeta gown and decked in jewels. She was probably wearing every diamond in the Parkinsons’ dwindling Gringotts vault.

Theodore stood next to her, swaying. He looked drunk.

“Parkinson and Nott’s wands are in the mix?” Malfoy asked Dolohov. “Their parents’?”

“Everyone’s. We told them it was a security measure, nobody made a fuss. They’ll get them back on their way out at the end of the night.”

“Good.”

Malfoy noticed that Theodore had started looking their way.

His dark eyes were bleary with drink; they lingered on Hermione. Bitter amusement danced in his gaze; after a moment, Theodore smiled at her.

Hermione looked away rapidly, clearly nervous and uncomfortable.

“Nott looks drunk,” Malfoy said to Dolohov, his eyes not leaving Theodore. “Did something happen?”

“He requested to join the Death Eaters again. We declined. I guess he was disappointed.”

“He hasn’t got the stomach for it,” Malfoy said, still watching Theodore. “No steel in his spine.”

Theodore had returned to conversation with his fiancée and friends, but he glanced back at Hermione intermittently.

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed. But then Hermione tugged on his hand. Malfoy looked away from Theodore at once, turning his attention to her.

“Yes, darling?”

“Let’s leave,” she said. “This is so uncomfortable.”

Malfoy took in her discomfited expression. He wanted Hermione to get used to being around people sooner rather than later, but he also didn’t like seeing her unhappy.

“Alright,” he said, squeezing her hand. “Five more minutes, okay? Then we can go.”

Malfoy snagged a glass of champagne off a passing waiter’s tray and handed it to Hermione,

“Let’s speed this up,” Malfoy said to Dolohov. “Hermione wants to leave.”

If Dolohov was surprised by Malfoy’s acquiescence to Hermione, he hid it well.

“You want to go see the wands now?” Dolohov asked, picking at something in his teeth. “I was just in the room—they said it’ll take another hour at least to sort through them all...”

“I’ll head over now. You enjoy the party.”

“Cheers.”

Malfoy took hold of Hermione’s hand and crossed through the center of the ballroom, headed for the formal entrance on the other side, the entertaining foyer leading in from the formal Floo.

Guests eyed them.

There were more than a few raised eyebrows, more than a few fluttering hand fans rising to cover titters and snide comments. These weak, snake eyed aristocrats. All they knew how to do was judge.

Malfoy had long become accustomed to ignoring the opinions of irrelevant people. But he felt Hermione wilt under the scrutiny, recoiling closer to his side.

He drew her closer and pressed his lips to the top of her head, comforting her. He gestured with his free hand and the sound of shattering glass exploded all around them. Guests exclaimed in shock; their champagne flutes and cocktail glasses had exploded, shattering right in their hands. One woman cried out in pain as a large piece cut her foot. One wizard seemed to have gotten some in his eye.

Malfoy steered Hermione forward even as she froze in alarm at the mayhem.

“They’re fine,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

Broken crystal crunched under Malfoy’s shoes. He vanished the shards in Hermione’s path. No more dirty glances.

The formal entrance to the entertaining hall was a tall, gilded set of double doors. Through the doors was the massive Floo that all the guests had arrived from.

One uniformed Floo attendant stood smartly at attention by the fireplace. Another stood by the coat closet. Their faces were politely neutral. Neither looked up when Hermione and Malfoy walked in.

Malfoy approached the coat closet. The attendant’s bland expression went cold at once. He stepped sharply into their path and seized Malfoy’s arm.

“*Dissipadio*,” Malfoy said, and the Floo attendant released him immediately. He stepped back to the side, a polite smile on his face. “As you were.”

Hermione stared at the attendant, who didn’t seem to see her.

“What...?” she asked.

“Soldier golem,” Malfoy said. “It won’t hurt you.”

He pushed open the coat closet door and they entered.

Hermione froze in her tracks. Malfoy assumed it was because this room looked nothing like the bejeweled festivities they had just left. It was large and cold, with stone floors and windowless walls. A place of military business. Of war.

Twenty Death Eaters paced the room; they didn’t look up as Malfoy and Hermione entered. Their focus was on the ground.

Neatly laid out on the stone floor were hundreds of wands.

“What?” Hermione whispered.

Elm, cherry, oak—they lay flat like so many discarded hyphens, neatly spaced in gleaming rows. Death Eaters walked among them, picking them up one at a time in gloved hands. They murmured spells, then placed the wands back down.

Once a wand was replaced on the floor, a red X appeared before it, denoting it as a failed match.

Malfoy knew the sight would probably alarm Hermione. But he intended to keep her close whenever possible, and eventually he hoped she would become relaxed and unbothered by operations of war. Anyway, they would be done soon. Hermione would be peacefully nibbling on a goat cheese puff outside before she knew it.

“Only one minute,” he promised her.

He turned to face the Death Eaters.

“Progress?” he called.

The men looked up at the sound of his voice. The higher-rank ones straightened up and dipped their heads, while the lower level soldiers knelt.

Malfoy was third in command in the Dark forces—and in this room, he was the highest ranking man. The second highest was Rookwood, who stepped forward. He demonstrated no graceful deference; he was used to being the most important person in the room, Malfoy knew.

“One hundred and eighty-seven wands checked,” Rookwood said to Malfoy, spitting on the ground. “A hundred and four left to go.”

“What *is this?*” Hermione whispered, staring at the wands on the floor.

“Just something we’re working on,” Malfoy told Hermione. “No need to be concerned.”

Rookwood let out a low, derisive laugh.

“Eccentric,” he said finally. “Even for you, Malfoy.”

Malfoy ignored him. He checked his wristwatch.

“Two hours until the party ends,” Malfoy called out to the room. “The golem at the entry will stop anyone from retrieving their wands until you’re done. If you find it, call me at once.”

Malfoy put his hand on Hermione’s hip and made to steer her away.

“What *is this?*” Hermione asked again, louder. She looked from Malfoy to Rookwood, her eyes wide. “Why are you searching all these wands?”

From behind Malfoy, Rookwood snorted disrespectfully.

“Curious little tart, isn’t she?”

“Give me one second,” Malfoy said to Hermione.

He dropped a gentle, shimmering blinding charm on her, covering her vision and hearing. She lifted her hands in surprise, groping in the air, but Malfoy just caught her hand and squeezed it reassuringly.

Then he took two striding steps forward and grabbed the back of Rookwood’s head. In one forceful movement Malfoy slammed the man onto the stone floor.

The sound of his head cracking against the stone was grotesque. An over-loud, ringing crunch that echoed throughout the room.

None of the other Death Eaters moved. They watched silently. The room was still but for Rookwood’s wet, choking sounds of pain.

A pool of blood spread below his head. He tried to lift himself up onto his arms but Malfoy kicked him forcefully in the ribs, turning him over onto his back.

Rookwood coughed up a spray of blood.

Malfoy crouched down, looking into Rookwood’s eyes.

“Too much,” Malfoy said calmly. “You understand me?”

Rookwood nodded. His mouth was slack and bloody, his eyes shut with pain. Blood dripped down from his forehead, catching in the corners of his eyes and trickling down the sides of his face to the stone floor like inky tears.

“This is a valuable lesson for you, Augustus.” Malfoy plucked a handkerchief from Rookwood’s jacket pocket and wiped his hands. “You think you’re above being respectful. But see where that gets you? Crushed like an ant on the ground.”

Rookwood whimpered and Malfoy straightened up.

“You’re one man short now,” he said to the other Death Eaters, tossing the soiled handkerchief onto Rookwood’s heaving chest. “But the timeline stays the same, understand? Two hours. Let’s find that wand.”

Malfoy cast a cleaning charm on his hand. Then he slipped his fingers into Hermione’s and led her away.

Somewhat graphic violence, blood.

## Chapter 14

*What were they doing with all those wands?*

The sheer number of Death Eaters in the room, the obvious significance of this carefully orchestrated effort—there was something major going on here, something that the Order certainly didn't know about.

Hermione felt Malfoy return his hand to hers and begin walking away. She could still neither see nor hear; she followed him blindly for a few steps, holding tight to his hand, and then the charm around her head dissipated.

Hermione twisted around, trying to look back at the wands, but she and Malfoy were already stepping out the door and into the marble-floored Floo foyer. She watched the door swing slowly shut. The soldier golem beside it stared blankly ahead, keeping guard at its post. Hermione hadn't been aware that the Death Eaters had begun to employ magical sentries, but she supposed it made sense. The Death Eaters, evidently, had more important and careful work to do than stand guard.

Hermione turned back around and looked up at Malfoy.

Unlike the golem, Malfoy's face was unusually emotive. He looked irritated, grim. A few strands of his white blond hair had come slightly disheveled somehow; they hung loose over his forehead. He ran a distracted hand through them, pushing them back into place.

"Malfoy," she said quietly, jogging a little to keep up. He was walking quickly. "What was that?"

"Just had to talk to Rookwood about something," Malfoy said.

He looked down and seemed to remember that her legs were much shorter than his.

"Sorry." Malfoy slowed down and took her hand more securely in his. "You alright?"

"What are the Death Eaters looking for?" Hermione asked, keeping her voice low as Malfoy led her back into the main ballroom.

"It's nothing for you to be concerned about."

"It looked important," Hermione insisted stubbornly. The ballroom was much louder than the Floo foyer and she clung close to him, committed to being heard. "Whose wand? It can't be the Elder Wand, that was destroyed. Malfoy—please tell me—?"

"I said no," he said, looking amused at her curiosity. "Come on—you wanted to leave, let's get you out of here."

Hermione huffed but followed him as he led her through the crowd. She was nervous about the scrutiny and judgment of the partygoers, and tried to keep her head low. Three years in hiding in the Order safe house had hardened Hermione against all manner of things, but social stress was not one of them.

But all the guests seemed to be behaving themselves much better. Probably due to Malfoy's broken glass show.

Hermione was relieved to field no more stares, but at the same time it was unsettling that none of the guests seemed surprised or alarmed by Malfoy's casual use of violence. Perhaps it wasn't unusual for him to break things when people displeased him.

Either way, they crossed undisturbed through the room, towards the tall double doors that led to the rest. Malfoy didn't say goodbye to anyone, just waved open the door and took Hermione's hand to delicately lead her over the threshold.

And then they were in the hall again, alone. The door swung shut. The party was behind them.

Hermione took an unsteady breath. She was suddenly aware of how much the party had taken out of her. So much light and noise and conversation, after her years in relative solitude. She swayed and Malfoy steadied her with a hand on her waist.

"God," she whispered in a quivering voice. "That was a lot."

"Poor thing," Malfoy hummed, leaning down to kiss her cheek. "You did so well."

"We're alone now," Hermione said. "You can tell me what was going on with the wands, can't you?"

"We don't talk about Death Eater things," he reminded her, a soft warning in his voice. "You don't worry about the war. We had a deal."

Hermione was silent and Malfoy kissed her neck. He tried to take her hand in his, but Hermione's nerves were frayed thin—a surge of rebellious obstinance rose in her and she snatched her hand out of his grasp.

"Just tell me," she snapped.

Malfoy stilled. He had been nuzzling her skin, tenderly affectionate, but at her words he slowly straightened up. The hall was dimly lit and his eyes were in shadow. Hermione tried not to be cowed, tried not to feel small even as he towered over her.

"I think you should try that again," Malfoy said. "How about politely this time? Like the good girl I know you are."

"No," Hermione said, but her voice had gone thin and nervous. "Just tell me. Why did you even bring me into that room if you're not going to answer my questions?"

Malfoy took a step closer, narrowing the already thin distance between their bodies. Hermione stumbled back but he tightened his hand on her waist, keeping her close.

“Why?” Malfoy repeated softly. There was a trace of mockery in his low voice. “Because I wanted to. Because I can bring you wherever I like. That’s my job, Hermione. Deciding where we go. Deciding what you do. And *your* job, sweetheart, is to do as you’re told. That was the deal we made, or don’t you remember?”

Hermione’s stomach twisted with a combination of anger and nerves. It was nerve-wracking, seeing Malfoy this way. Her hand spasmed and his gaze dropped immediately to it.

Malfoy clicked his tongue and reached for her fingers, presumably to examine them. But Hermione was jumpy and upset; she pulled her hand stubbornly away. She misjudged the force of the movement. Her hand hit the stone wall with a painful crack; her knuckles sang with the impact.

“Ow,” she hissed, but the noise was abruptly cut off into a sharp exhale when Malfoy pinned her against the wall.

He moved unbelievably quickly, like a shadow or a hunting animal. He was in her space in the span of half a breath and Hermione suddenly realized how much he must contain his speed and strength around her. How terrifying he would be at full force, at full violence.

Malfoy grabbed her jaw firmly in one large hand, tipping her head back so she had to look up at him. His expression was stark and shadowed in the dim light of the hall. His eyes were cold and stern, his mouth a hard, grim line.

“You,” he said softly. “Are being very difficult.”

Hermione whimpered and he pressed her against the wall a little more firmly.

“I am a patient man,” Malfoy breathed. He was so close to her, he didn’t need to speak above a whisper for his words to make goosebumps erupt on Hermione’s arms and neck. “Maybe not towards everyone, but certainly towards you. Aren’t I, darling?”

Hermione nodded wordlessly, her eyes wide and fixed on his.

Malfoy took her hand and this time Hermione let him. He lifted it gently, carefully—as though he knew it was still hurting from the wall—and held it up between them, showing her.

Hermione watched her own hand quiver, was forced to look at the scraped skin on her knuckles and the worsened shaking.

“So you should know it makes me very upset,” he said. “When you damage something that belongs to me.”

Malfoy’s eyes were cold with alert intelligence; Hermione had the feeling he could sense everything there was to know about her. The anxious, panicked whining in her ears. The way her heart pounded, fast and frenetic like that of a cornered hare’s.

Without breaking eye contact, Malfoy brought her fingers to his mouth and dropped a single light kiss to them. *Mine*, his expression said.

“I’ve told you before what I want from you,” Malfoy murmured. His hand on her jaw flexed a little. “And *you* told me you could give it. That was our deal. But you’re under no Vow, Hermione. So if you’ve had enough, just say so, hm? And I’ll let go of this pretty little face, and I’ll take one *big* step back, to give you plenty of room. And then you can run. I’ll even give you a head start.”

“And what will you do?” she whispered, her voice breaking in anger and misery. “Drag me back? Lock me in the dungeon and find a loophole so you can abandon the Order?”

“It really is anyone’s guess, isn’t it?” he asked.

“You’ll die,” Hermione said thickly. “If you break your Vow. You’ll die.”

Malfoy smiled a little, without humor.

“Then run.”

Hermione didn’t move. She just stared up at him, her breaths coming unsteadier, her vision wobbling.

“I just wanted to know, okay?” she breathed finally, and her voice broke pitifully. She was confused, frightened, tired. “I just—I just wanted to *know*. I’m frightened for the Order. If your lot is doing something—bad.”

Malfoy’s expression flickered for a moment. Sympathy, tenderness.

“Then you tell me that,” he said, more softly this time. “Alright? You tell me you’re scared. You say—I’m frightened, that’s why I’m asking. Make it better. You don’t jerk your hand away from me. You don’t misbehave.”

“Even if I said all that, you wouldn’t tell me,” Hermione protested.

“Maybe that’s true,” Malfoy said, his eyes drilling into hers. “Or maybe I would have felt sorry for worrying you. Maybe I’d tell you just enough so your little heart doesn’t fret so much. Like: *I’m a Death Eater, Hermione. And everything I do is something you would consider bad. But you don’t need to worry, because this wand business has nothing to do with your Order.*”

Hermione nodded, barely noticing she was doing so. She sagged against him with relief, her whole body shaking.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay.”

“I know that you’re still getting accustomed to this,” Malfoy said. “I understand. But you’re a very clever witch, aren’t you darling? So I hope you won’t need too many repeat reminders that this is exactly what you signed up for.”

"It's hard," she admitted forcefully, blinking away tears. "To give up control. I've never—"

To her surprise, Malfoy exhaled softly in pleasure at her words.

"I know," he cooed. He dropped his face slowly to kiss her cheek, her nose. He was all softness now, melting in response to her words. "I know, sweetheart. But you're doing *such a good job*. You're working so hard on it for me, aren't you?"

Hermione didn't understand him, didn't understand the shape of his desires. She'd never met anyone who wanted what he wanted.

In this moment, in the dim and lushly quiet hall, Malfoy seemed to her something darker and more complicated than a man.

"Yes," she whispered finally. It was an honest answer. "I am. I'm working so hard on it."

Malfoy let out a soft breath. It was almost a groan.

"My beautiful, clever girl."

~

Once they were back in his bedroom, Hermione curled under his covers at once. She didn't take off her dress, she didn't even take off her shoes.

She wrapped the downy blankets around her and buried her face in them.

Malfoy stood at the foot of the bed for a while, hands in his pockets, just watching her.

"Shoes off," he said finally. "And shower first. Then we can go to bed."

It was barely nine at night. Hermione thought about protesting.

But she was tired. The straps of her shoes were cutting into her. And she felt sticky and uncomfortable.

So she got unsteadily out of bed and kicked the heels off. Malfoy hummed happily and kissed her cheek. He picked up the heels and went to the closet to return them to their shelf. Hermione followed him and turned away from him, waiting for him to unzip her dress.

Malfoy kissed the back of her neck, then her shoulder, then her arm. He unzipped her dress and let it fall to the ground, pooling around her ankles in a crumpled heap.

Hermione covered her chest with her arms, but Malfoy didn't try to look at her. He carefully brushed her hair to one side, letting his fingers drag through the curls in delicate, reverent motions.

He dipped his head to kiss the nape of her neck.

He paused.

“Can I shower with you?” he asked quietly, his breath tickling her skin.

“Um,” Hermione said. She swallowed. “Maybe next time.”

Malfoy didn’t protest. He kissed her temple and squeezed her hip, then let her go.

Hermione showered alone, the whole huge marble shower all to herself; Malfoy sat on the rim of the tub in the bathroom and waited. The glass walls of the shower were steamy and he was far enough away that she felt comfortable with her privacy. He seemed content to just be in her company.

Rose-scented shampoo, creamy pink conditioner. Foaming body wash that smelled like vanilla and milk. Hermione took her time, feeling her muscles relax in the fragrant steam.

He dried her with a large, fluffy towel after the shower, then helped her into a nightgown. Malfoy handed her some Dittany oil with a firm instruction to rub it into her fingers and palms before undressing for the shower himself.

She left quickly as he took off his shirt, her eyes averted from his body.

Hermione clambered into bed, wrapping herself once more in covers. She dripped some Dittany on her palm and rubbed it into the skin. She was careful to try not to spill any on the soft bedding, worried about getting oil stains onto the fabric.

The room was warm and comfortable. Hermione was tired. In the soft cocoon of the bed, her skin warm and her hair lightly damp from the shower, she grew drowsy rapidly. The smell of Dittany oil was comforting, and it made her hands hurt less.

By the time Malfoy finished showering and joined her—shirtless and in loose pajama trousers, one hand still toweling his blond hair dry—her fingers had stopped shaking entirely. Malfoy stepped forward and wordlessly picked up her hand, examining it front and back, before nodding and turning to finish drying his hair.

She set the bottle of Dittany to the side, watching him.

It occurred to Hermione suddenly that, unlike the previous night—*how was it possible for it to have been only one long day so far?*—she didn’t have the fugue of Calming Draught working in her favor. Maybe Malfoy was too much of a gentleman to take advantage of her when she was inebriated, but now she was unmedicated.

What if he wanted to fuck her?

She imagined his hands on her, maneuvering her easily into place, tossing her into whatever position he liked. Imagined him crawling on top of her, whispering things to her—

Hermione’s heart lurched. Would he let her ask for more time before she had to give that to him? Maybe she should ask for Calming Draught again..?

"I'm not going to do anything," Malfoy said, as though he'd read her mind. His back was still turned to her. "I just want to hold you."

"Okay," she said, light-headed with relief.

"But I'm going to keep my shirt off," Malfoy continued, dropping the towel into a hamper in the corner of the room. "I need to feel you on my skin. Okay?"

"Okay," Hermione said quietly, trying to avoid looking at the trail of dark blond hair on his stomach, leading down under his pants. "Do I have to undress...?"

"Not unless you want to."

"Okay," Hermione said again.

She sat in bed, watching him as he flicked off lights and reinforced the wards on the windows. Malfoy blew out her little candle last, which Hermione had forgotten was even still burning. She liked the room more, with her candle in it.

The room settled comfortably into darkness. Malfoy left the windows uncurtained, letting in the faintly moonlit tinted glow of blue-black night.

He came towards the bed, silhouetted darkly against the window, and Hermione held very still, still sitting up, nervous to move at all. One of his hands found her waist; Malfoy pushed her so she lay flat on her back, then he entered the bed.

The mattress shifted under her, drawing her a little closer to him.

"Pretty girl," he said softly into her ear, collecting her into his arms. "Did you have a good day?"

In the darkness, Hermione was hyper-aware of their bodies together.

"It was long," Hermione said, distracted.

Malfoy drew her closer, burying his face into her neck and her hair. She felt each of his breaths against her skin.

He made a low, vibrating noise of satisfaction and gripped her thigh—he dragged her lower body a little closer to his.

Hermione couldn't tell if he was hard, and she didn't know if she'd rather have that information or not. She shifted slightly, trying to figure out where along his body she was wedged, and he laughed knowingly. Hermione's face heated.

"Go to sleep," Malfoy said. His voice was slow and drowsy. "Turn your face against my chest. I want to feel your nose and mouth against me."

Hermione did so.

"Like this?" she asked against his skin.

"Yes," he sighed. His chest rumbled against her face. "Perfect."

Her breaths were directly against his skin; so close she worried about it bothering him. Wouldn't it be warm, or—moist? But Malfoy seemed nearly drunk with satisfaction.

He kissed the top of her head, then her temple, then the top of her head again. He trailed a hand down her hip, then squeezed her close to him.

Hermione felt his body begin to relax. He was all alert muscles and strong frame; even when he untensed it felt controlled. Like a tightly wound machine switching off for the night.

Was he vulnerable like this with anyone else?

"Don't move," he instructed in a lazy hum. "Alright? Stay here."

Hermione closed her eyes, surprised at how easy it was to relax in such a firm embrace.

"Okay," she said into his skin. "Goodnight."

~

When Hermione woke up, it was early. The sunlight coming through the windows was weak and cool.

Her cheek was still resting on Malfoy's chest. She had drooled on him a little in her sleep; she wiped at his skin quickly, trying to get the wet off.

He caught her hand and returned it to her side.

"Leave it," he murmured. "Don't worry about it."

"Sorry," she said hoarsely. Her eyelids were still heavy.

They were tangled together, and it was shockingly like waking up with—a *boyfriend*. So normal. The sheets had come loose and twisted at some point in the night. One of Hermione's legs was on top of the blanket, resting over Malfoy's knees. Her nightgown had ridden up a little in the process and she quickly pulled her leg back under the covers and tugged down the satin hem, covering herself.

His body was large and warm and steady next to her. He smelled good. Masculine.

Hermione clenched her thighs together, then instantly hated herself.

She was unaccustomed to sharing a bed with someone, that was all. Hermione had been lonely for a long time.

She sat up, already feeling the sleepy languor disappear in favor of tensed, alert muscles. She put some space between them.

“What are you doing?” asked Malfoy. His voice was low and drowsy.

“I thought you usually exercised in the mornings,” she said evasively, shifting further still away.

“I’ll skip today. I didn’t want to leave bed.”

“Okay.”

Hermione stood, tugging the hem of her nightgown down to make sure it covered her. She went to the closet. A moment later, she heard Malfoy get out of bed and follow her.

Her nightgown was thin and she shivered. Malfoy entered the closet but she didn’t want to meet his eyes, she stared instead at the hanging clothing.

“You’re nervous?” Malfoy asked, standing behind her.

Hermione didn’t know how to answer. She shrugged. Malfoy was silent a moment, but didn’t pry further.

He reached past her and pulled a hanger off the rod.

“Take your pajamas off,” he said. “Let’s get you dressed.”

She took off her nightgown but didn’t have to shed her underwear, for which she was grateful.

~

Hermione didn’t know what day of the week it was. And anyway, she didn’t expect that a Death Eater adhered to anything so commonplace as *weekdays* and weekends.

It was Saturday, it turned out. Malfoy told her when she asked.

But there was work for him to do.

They started their day in his office, with Hermione choosing another book off his shelf and settling onto the ottoman near his desk. She had two cups of honeyed tea and a chocolate biscotti.

Malfoy had black coffee. He pored silently over documents. They remained in companionable silence for most of the morning until a sudden, unexpected tapping on the window.

Hermione dropped the book, startled. She looked up to find a ghostly, semi-transparent owl at the glass. It rapped impatiently at the window, a small envelope clutched in its opalescent

beak. Another magical sentry, in the shape of an owl this time.

Malfoy looked at it for a moment, then stood.

He waved a hand, releasing a ward of some kind, and the phantom owl stepped through the glass pane.

It dropped the envelope into Malfoy's palm and then flew away, the beating of its wings noiseless as darkness.

Malfoy read the note with hard eyes. He tossed it into the fire and the flames turned green. Floo powder imbued in the fibers of the parchment?

"I have to go for a bit," he said to Hermione. "I'll be back in an hour or two."

"Where are you going?" she asked, sitting up nervously.

"The Commander wants to see me," he said, his mouth twisting wryly. "I'm to explain why we've failed yet again to find the wand."

Malfoy examined Hermione, and she wondered if he was deciding whether to bring her or not.

Finally, he turned away.

"I'll have the servants prepare lunch for you. I should be back for dinner."

Hermione didn't know who the Commander was. Nobody on the Order's side did. She knew better than to ask, but she couldn't help but worry that perhaps a visit to the Commander was dangerous in some way. Voldemort had tortured people when they failed him. Surely his successor—vicious enough to have taken Voldemort's spot, after all—would be no kinder.

"What if something happens?"

Malfoy smiled at her.

"Worried about me?"

"Yes," she said, refusing to be embarrassed. "And me."

"If you need me, hold the signet ring in your hand and squeeze. I'll come back immediately. And don't worry about me. I can take care of the both of us just fine. I have more than enough strength for that."

"You don't want me to come?"

Malfoy smiled again and touched her cheek.

"You should stay here," he asked quietly. "Away from everything. This house can be like our little haven."

She just looked at him, then nodded.

Malfoy checked his watch, then kissed her cheek.

He stepped into the green flames of the Floo, and in the split second before he disappeared, Hermione saw his Death Eater robes appear around him. She saw the curved edge of his mask flicker into place. And then he was gone.

Hermione spent only a few more minutes in his office, half-heartedly reading more of his books. But she grew antsy and soon started to wander around the house.

Previously, she had been driven by purpose to search every corner, to try to find possible points of escape, or helpful information for the Order. But now those concerns were no longer relevant.

She walked slowly through the vast halls instead, trying to divert herself by looking at the paintings and the sculptures.

The house was hushed and silent. As still as a tomb. Hermione wondered what it had been like before she arrived. Had Malfoy just walked around like this, in the dry, unmoving silence? Surrounded by lifeless furniture and beautiful art. Like a pharaoh's ghost, she thought, as she traced her finger over a gold and lapis lazuli vase.

His life, she decided, seemed rather lonely. Perhaps that was why Pansy and Nott lived here, too.

As though on cue, footsteps broke the silence behind her.

She spun around and backed up a little into the vase, then had to dart her hand out to keep it steady on its plinth.

"You scared me," she said to Nott.

He looked hungover.

He was in a rumpled but somehow still elegant-looking brown suit, and he squinted in the sunlight streaming in from a nearby, velvet-curtain framed window.

"You left the party early," he said idly, coming to a stop beside her.

He looked at the vase with an amused smile, as though wondering why Hermione was being so proletariat as to admire a decorative item.

"I'm surprised you remember anything," she said. "Who gets that drunk at their own engagement party?"

He snorted but didn't respond.

Hermione pressed her lips together and returned her gaze to the vase.

“You shouldn’t have stared at me so much,” Hermione said. “It made me uncomfortable. And I could tell Malfoy didn’t like it.”

“What a well-behaved little pet you are,” Nott said, sounding shockingly unrepentant. Wasn’t he afraid of Malfoy’s wrath? “So attentive to your owner’s needs.”

Shame and anger curled in Hermione’s stomach.

“Just leave me alone,” she said, her voice hollow. “I don’t need your judgment, or your dirty insinuations. You have no idea what it’s like being in my position.”

“I could talk about positions with you all day,” Nott said easily. “But we have rather more interesting things to discuss, I think.”

“I’m still not ready to make any deal with you, if that’s what you’re talking about,” she said, walking away.

The hallway was wide and long and high-ceilinged, and each step of her slippers feet made an echoing little tap on the marble, muffled only when she paced over the stretches of carpet lining the stone.

Nott followed her. His shoes were louder.

“Dare I ask if you’re growing comfortable in captivity?” he asked.

“Why are you doing this?” Hermione asked angrily. “Don’t you have a fiancée to spend time with? Leave me alone.”

“Pansy and I are engaged only in name,” he said coolly. His strides were long and he kept up with her effortlessly, even as Hermione sped up. “I’m quite unattached otherwise, you know.”

“Well I have no interest in being your diversion,” Hermione said, wheeling on him suddenly. “You’re going to get me killed. *You* might be a peer and—some sort of friend to Malfoy, but I’m not. Your little games here have real consequences for me. If Malfoy thought I was—I was *conspiring with you*, or something—”

Nott took a slow step closer to her and Hermione stepped back at once.

“Don’t even think about it,” she hissed shakily. “If you’re bored in your fake marriage, find a socialite to pester. I’m not here for your amusement.”

“No,” Nott said quietly. His black eyes were flat. “Only Draco’s, I suppose.”

“I could have you killed,” Hermione said without thinking, letting each word drop with meaningful force. “He would do it for me. You know he would.”

There was a heavy silence.

Nott raised his eyebrows and Hermione felt her cheeks flood with color.

"I'm only operating in the world I find myself in," she said defensively. "I have no wand, I have no power. But I have Malfoy. Don't think I won't use him to protect myself."

"How terribly Slytherin of you," Nott said, and he sounded impressed. "I must admit being Draco's pet suits you. You wear that collar like a crown."

He took a polite step back and Hermione relaxed by a fraction.

"You'll be happy to know that I didn't find you today to chase your skirt," Nott said, flicking a piece of dust off his sleeve. "Do you want to know why I *am* here?"

Hermione just looked at him, refusing to give him the satisfaction of answering. She waited for him to tell her. He just looked back at her, eyebrows lifted, challenging her.

Hermione caved.

"Tell me, then."

"I'm here," Nott said slowly, seemingly enjoying this very much. "Because Shacklebolt has a message for you."

Hermione stopped breathing.

"What?" she whispered, frozen.

Cold shock was crashing over her, so intense that for a moment Hermione seemed to float above her body, examining herself in the vast hallway with Nott.

"Oh yes," Nott said calmly. "Do you want to hear it?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "Yes—of course."

Nott took out his wand from his trouser pocket and waved it elegantly in the air.

A flickering image of Kingsley appeared in the hall. Devoid of color, a grey and black facsimile of life.

Hermione fought for breath, stepping closer instinctively. That was him. But it was a pre-recorded message, he stared past her, unseeing.

"Hermione," he said, and that was his voice too. It crackled briefly as though with static, then grew stronger and clearer. "I'm not sure if Nott will deliver this to you. He says he will, but you know Slytherins. We're coming to break you out. We need you back here, the injuries are —well, we need you back here. I hope you're alive. If you're alright, send word back with Nott, something only you would say. I'll be waiting."

The message ended.

## Chapter 15

Malfoy stepped out of the Floo and into a cold, dark foyer. The green flames behind him sputtered out at once. Ash settled onto the hearth, barely noticeable against the thick layer of dust and grime that was already there.

The Commander's house was derelict. Crumbling. Those who had never seen it might have been surprised at its deteriorated condition—the Dark Regime was more successful than it had ever been, its coffers full with Ministry money. So why would its leader live like this?

Malfoy knew why. It was because the Commander didn't care about the cause, or the wealth, or the power.

The Commander didn't care about much of anything at all.

This was evident in the flagrant disrepair of everything in the house. The marble of the floors was completely shattered in places, victim to misfired spells or simply the ravages of time. Great cracked pieces crunched under Malfoy's boots and disintegrated into grainy dust beneath his feet. He looked down with a grimace and shook his head.

The smell was terrible too. Rot and decay, moldy curtains and peeling wallpaper. Malfoy tightened the mask around his face. He wanted to be home. Where his room smelled like cinnamon candles and he had a girl whose hair smelled like roses. Malfoy understood now, the stories of ruthless emperors and generals who worshipped at the feet of their wives. Hermione brought him comfort and pleasure he simply could not get anywhere else.

He continued on his way through the dark, shuttered hall and towards the Commander's throne room. It was behind a huge set of wooden doors, in no better condition than the rest of the house. The wood was molding and splintered. One of the doors hung at an angle, askew on a broken hinge.

Malfoy laid his palm flat against the non-broken door and entered.

It was brighter in here, though no less dusty. Malfoy removed his mask and squinted at the morning sunlight, streaming palely in from a single large, unshuttered window at the head of the room.

In front of the window stood the Commander. She gazed out out at the blackened, dead grounds of the estate.

"Hello, mother," Malfoy said, taking a seat on the sofa.

Narcissa gave him a vague sort of wave but didn't look away from the window.

Malfoy was sitting in what had once been the entertaining center of the room. Dusty scotch glasses stood on the table, untouched from the last time social visitors had been here, years

ago. There was an empty liquor bottle on the ground. Malfoy nudged it away with the toe of his shoe and it rolled unsteadily to the wall before resting there with a defeated *clink*.

The noise went unacknowledged by Narcissa, but the owl next to her shuffled its feathers in reproach. It had been sleeping.

It was the same ghostly, semi-translucent eagle owl that had delivered the note to Malfoy this morning; it hooted now and flew to him, settling on the arm of the sofa.

“Hello, Dumbo,” Malfoy said, scratching the owl’s feathered head. “I see my mother refuses to let you rest in your grave.”

“It’s only a replica,” Narcissa said absently. “Your real old owl is buried on the grounds, Draco. You know that.”

She touched the glass of the window with her fingertips. She reminded Malfoy of a woman in a dream.

“Poor Dumbo...” Narcissa sighed. “He brought you so many sweets from me, all those years you were at school. Do you remember?”

“Come now,” Malfoy said, letting the owl rub its beak against his index finger. “Let’s remain in the here and now, shall we?”

It was a joke. The here and now held nothing of interest for Narcissa. Old photographs from ten or more years in the past were everywhere here in the throne room. Some behind shattered frames, some whole. Moving images of Lucius and Narcissa, smiling and laughing, not stiff like the formal portraits hanging in the halls of this house. Some of the framed photographs included a small, serious-faced childhood Draco.

This whole room was filled with things that had been untouched since the early days of the war.

There was only one object here that was new. The shattered, ruby-hilted sword of Gryffindor, mounted on display above Narcissa’s throne. It was the sword that had killed Voldemort.

*Ex dolore vires*, read the iron words beneath it.

From grief comes strength.

Narcissa walked to her throne and settled quietly upon her place beneath the sword.

“How are you?” she asked Malfoy, finally meeting his eyes.

“Fine,” Malfoy said, withdrawing his hand from Dumbo. “All is well, for the most part. Pansy and Theodore are still guests in my home, which nobody is enjoying...”

“I’ve already told you,” Narcissa reprimanded, and there was a faint hint of the gracious, propriety-minded mother that she had once been. “It’s only right to help your old friends. The

Parkinsons are up to their throats in debt. You are to host their daughter until the wedding is over."

Malfoy exhaled with irritation.

"Certainly," he said.

Dumbo fluttered its wings, stretching the plumage out, and for a moment both Malfoy and his mother watched it. He wondered if she, like him, was thinking about the beautiful sable white color of the real Dumbo's feathers. The hue was lost, in this sentry replica.

"You still haven't found the wand," Narcissa said finally. Dully.

"No," Malfoy said. "It wasn't among the guests' wands at the engagement party. I'm continuing the search."

"I need it. You ought to pull all your soldiers off the other projects, divert all of our resources —"

"You have no hope of finding that wand unless the regime remains in power," Malfoy said irritably. "I've told you. We can't just drop everything to chase ghosts."

Narcissa made a displeased click of her tongue, then looked away. Malfoy regretted speaking harshly to her.

"We'll find it," he said. "We've ruled out the wands of almost everyone who was there that night. Sooner or later we'll find it, and I will deliver it to you."

"I know you think I'm stupid," Narcissa said absently, letting her fingers trail over an array of objects on a cluttered table next to her. Sentimental tokens, old family heirlooms.

Her fingers landed on a gold-framed photo of her and Lucius on their wedding day.

"I never said that," Malfoy said softly.

Narcissa ignored him, gazing at the photo. A lifetime of love and loss flickered over her pale face. She put the photo down, as though unable to bear looking at it for a moment longer. She picked up a large hourglass instead, set inside a brass frame. She turned it upside down and watched the fine sand trickle into the bottom chamber.

"Mother," Malfoy said, trying to keep her focus here. But Narcissa just gave him an irritated look.

"This was a gift from Lucius's mother," she said to Malfoy. "She gave it to me on my birthday, the first year Lucius and I were married. I think she was hinting that she wanted an heir soon..."

Narcissa smiled at the memory, years of worry lifting from her thin, pale face.

“Oh, we were thrilled when you were born,” she said, gazing fondly into the stream of falling sand. “Our sweet little boy. A Malfoy heir. You were so full of yourself, back in your Hogwarts days. Do you remember? You and the Parkinson girl. And those Crabbe and Goyle boys... you all came over the summer holiday to swim in our pool. The kitchen staff used to make you ice cream.”

Her eyes were soft and happy.

“I do remember,” Malfoy said.

“And your friends were teasing you and teasing you,” she continued dreamily, as though she hadn’t heard him. “And Lucius asked them why, and they said: *Draco thinks a Gryffindor girl is pretty. A mudblood.*”

Malfoy stilled. His jaw tightened.

“Your father was furious, of course,” she went on quietly. “I never did forgive him for hitting you in front of your friends like that.”

Malfoy preferred not to relive this memory.

“I thought plenty of girls were pretty,” he said coolly. “I was twelve.”

“Yes,” she laughed. “My romantic of a son.”

“I’m not a schoolboy any longer.”

Narcissa looked at him for a moment. Her smile faded.

“No,” she agreed quietly, resting the hourglass in her lap. “You certainly aren’t. You stole the Granger girl from the Order, I heard. Bella told me.”

Malfoy’s mouth twisted. He looked away.

“She had guard duty while I was infiltrating the Surrey safe house,” he said briskly. “I decided to take her home with me. A little—company.”

“I understand,” Narcissa said. “Nothing wrong with trying to find some companionship. And these archaic blood purity delineations... Pointless. As though *that’s* what we should be focused on...”

Her voice suddenly cut into silence. Malfoy looked at her and saw she was staring into the hourglass once more, her eyes haunted and red-rimmed.

Narcissa dragged one slender finger down the thick walls of the hourglass. A tear dripped down her cheek. Then another.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m trapped in there,” Narcissa whispered. “Drowning under all that sand. Do you know what I mean, darling? Like the world ripped in half when your father

died, and now I'm a prisoner in the wrong half. Trapped in the wrong life, watching all the wrong things happen through the glass..."

Her breath caught and she rested her head on the top of the hourglass. Her shoulders quaked from silent sobs.

"Lucius..." she whispered, her voice agonized. "I need you here."

Malfoy watched her for a moment, then stood. He gave Narcissa a kiss on her tear-streaked cheek, which she didn't acknowledge, and then left the room. She didn't seem to notice or care.

He had tried to comfort his mother in the past, but no longer. He knew now the best way to help her was to be emotionless enough for the both of them.

~

Malfoy didn't return home right away.

Being back at his family manor was always an unsettling affair, and after a moment of hesitation Malfoy took a dusty bottle of brandy from a shelf in the parlor and uncorked it.

He drank from the bottle while walking through the barren grounds of his ancestral home.

This place was a dump. Cracked paved paths, ancient roots overgrown, twisting through gravel and strangling desiccated roses bushes. It was like a graveyard. Why did his mother insist on staying here? When would she give up on this foolish endeavor?

He stopped in front of the Malfoy family graves. Staring at Lucius's headstone, Malfoy brought the bottle to his mouth and took another deep swig.

"You old bastard," he muttered. "Mother's lost her mind over you. God only knows why."

But he poured out a splash of liquor onto the grave anyway. Lucius had always been partial to brandy.

Malfoy paced through the tombstones, glancing unseeingly at the crumbled, illegible names of his ancestors, pulling deep, thoughtless swigs from the bottle. Not until the bottle was mostly empty did he realize this brandy had been part of Lucius's old extra proof stash. For when getting drunk off normal liquor was just too slow.

"Ah, fuck," Malfoy muttered, tossing the bottle into a dried up patch of cracked mud where a pond used to be.

A final joke from his dead father, it seemed like. What might Lucius have said, if he could see this?

*Don't filch liquor from me unless you can actually hold it, boy.*

Malfoy snorted humorlessly, then stumbled ungracefully to a seat on a stone bench. He rubbed his face and groaned.

His vision swam dangerously, and Malfoy regretted drinking. He had things to do after this, things he'd planned to do to help the Order. He owed Hermione progress, after all. The Vow burned in him, a reminder of all he'd promised.

After a few minutes Malfoy stood, swaying, testing his balance.

He Apparated away.

~

The mountains outside Hogsmeade were covered in a thin and growing dusting of snow. It had been an unseasonably warm winter in most of England, but here at this altitude the winds were cold and biting.

It was a good thing Malfoy had some liquor in his stomach to keep him warm.

Somewhere on this mountain were three young Death Eaters, silently tracking Nymphadora Tonks through the snow. They were going to kill her today.

Malfoy had trained these very soldiers, actually, a year or so ago when they'd been recruited. He knew exactly how they would approach an operation like this, knew that they'd take the longer road, up the western side of the mountain, to avoid being spotted by sharp-eyed Order sympathizers in the village. He knew that they would have planned this mission with severe accuracy, timing their progress down the second.

So, unfortunately for them, Malfoy knew exactly where and when to intercept their trajectory.

The first two Death Eaters didn't even see him coming. They were hunched behind a large craggy dune of snow, checking a compass. Malfoy slit their throats quickly and without fanfare, catching their bodies so they wouldn't make a sound as they collapsed onto the snow. No magic—he didn't want to leave a magical signature behind.

But the third man had been elsewhere, and Malfoy hadn't expected that. Soldiers weren't supposed to go off on their own at rest points like this, they were supposed to stay and keep watch. How ironic that the one Death Eater to have caught Malfoy unawares was the least disciplined one.

The soldier even had time to draw his wand.

Malfoy made short work of him anyway, but it was messier. Plus, Malfoy was very drunk—his reflexes were a hair too slow and the man managed to land an injury before he died.

The gash was in Malfoy's bicep, moderately deep and bleeding heavily.

"Fuck," Malfoy muttered, furious with himself.

The injury wasn't serious, but it indicated a sloppiness that Malfoy detested. He tied the sleeve of his robe tightly above the wound, trying to stop the flow of blood. Now he had to be careful not to get his blood on the snow. Blood was as good as a magical signature.

He wrapped his arm down to the elbow, then cast a glance at the crimson soaked snow all around. He tried to decide which would be more damning, his blood on the scene or his magical signature.

Finally, he picked up the third dead soldier's wand and used it to burn the snow, until the ice was steam and the blood was burnt carbon. Then, swaying, Malfoy snapped the wand and tossed it to the ground.

He started the journey down the mountain, deciding to at least keep his Healing spell and Apparition for when he was further away.

The trek was drunk and miserable. A kilometer or so away from the corpses, Malfoy decided it was safe enough to Heal his arm. The wound was still tender but at least it was scarring now instead of bleeding openly. Then he cast one more spell—a weather charm, which thickened the fall of snow all around him. That would cover the bodies and his tracks, and hopefully it would be days before the incident was discovered.

Malfoy Apparated back to his bedroom, still cursing his father's extra proof brandy.

The first thing he did was change out of his bloody Death Eater robes. Hermione wouldn't want to see him in those.

She would probably be pleased that he helped the Order though, wouldn't she? He wanted to make her happy. Just being back in this house and seeing all the little signs of her living here was enough to soothe Malfoy's soul. The rumpled, soft sheets of their recently slept in bed. Hermione's nightgown from that morning, folded loosely on a shelf where he'd left it when he undressed her.

Malfoy would have been perfectly happy if the entire universe ended just at these walls, and the only thing to do into eternity was spend his days with her. But that seemed like the sort of thing he ought to keep to himself, at risk of unsettling her.

"Hermione," Malfoy called, pacing into the living room. "Where are you, sweetheart?"

~

Hermione heard Malfoy calling for her and her nerves shattered. She had hoped to have more time to collect herself before he returned.

She was pacing in a tight circle in one of the many unused parlors of Malfoy's house. Nott had long gone upstairs, propelled by Hermione's insistence that she couldn't talk to him right now, that surely Malfoy would be home any moment ("Oh, yes," Nott had said with dark amusement. "*Don't want to get into trouble with daddy do we?*").

She pressed her hands to her eyes. Easy enough for Nott to be an arse. She was the one who spent all her time with Malfoy, she was the one that would have to keep this secret from him.

For a brief, burning moment, Hermione hated Nott. She even hated Kingsley. Their proposition had brought a new and ugly complication into her life. She'd been doing *fine*—she'd cut a deal with Malfoy that was saving Order lives. And now, against her will, Kingsley and Nott had come and shoved a new responsibility into her hands. Now she would have to keep their secret. And how, pray tell, did they expect her to hide this from Malfoy? Malfoy, who devoted most of his days paying attention to her?

Hermione hadn't told Nott as much yet, but she was fairly certain that she would be rejecting Kinsley's offer to break her out. She'd done more to help the Order here in a few short weeks than she had in the past year as an Healer. But informing Nott of this would be its own nightmare. The Order would think she was a traitor, or at minimum a stupid girl who had decided to choose comfort over principles. And she couldn't tell them about Malfoy's Vow. Neither Nott or Kingsley were likely to keep that information to themselves.

And Hermione needed the Vow to stay hidden. Because Hermione didn't want Malfoy to die.

She rubbed her face, her hands trembling.

"Stupid," she muttered to herself. "That's not the right way to be thinking about this—"

"Hermione?" came Malfoy's voice again. He was looking for her.

"I'm here," she called, wiping her cheeks. "I'm coming."

She stepped out of the parlor and into the hallway, then spent the short walk to the living room steeling herself. She kept her breathing steady; in, out, in, out. If she was lucky, Malfoy might not notice anything amiss with her demeanor. Although of course, she knew that was a futile hope—Hermione had never met a more penetratingly observant man.

But when Hermione stepped into the living room, the version of Malfoy that greeted her was not what she'd expected. He wasn't sharp-eyed, nor quietly alert, nor dangerously observant. Malfoy was—swaying. He appeared to be looking unsteadily for Hermione under throw blankets on the sofa, like he was expecting her to be under a decorative pillow.

Hermione slowed her pace, then stopped, watching him with confusion.

His blond hair was loose and windswept. He stumbled slightly as he investigated the sofa. She had never seen him like this.

"Malfoy?" Hermione asked.

He looked up instantly at the sound of her voice, then caught his balance with a hand on the back of the sofa.

"There you are," he said, collapsing into a seat. "Come here. You look so nice..."

"Malfoy," Hermione said, dropping into the seat next to him. "Are you drunk?"

He squinted an eye and made a *comme ci, comme ça* sort of hand gesture.

"A little," he admitted.

Hermione laughed out loud and Malfoy smiled crookedly. His face was much more relaxed than normal, his emotions more easily read.

"Oh my God," she marveled, taking in the show that was an inebriated Draco Malfoy.  
"You're a wreck."

"A wreck," he repeated. "Surely I don't look that bad?"

"What *happened*? Did you drink with the Commander?"

Malfoy didn't seem to want to talk about it. He took her hand instead, and though Hermione was usually skittish around large drunk men trying to touch her, she knew somehow that Malfoy would be gentle with her.

She was right. Malfoy just brought her hand delicately up to his lips and kissed her knuckles.

"I missed you," he said, resting her palm to his cheek.

It was incredibly sweet.

So sweet that, very unexpectedly, a tide of guilt came over Hermione.

She hadn't considered the possibility of guilt. The feeling that she was lying to someone who was being very good to her. Nott was a guest in Malfoy's home, and he was disloyal. Shouldn't Malfoy know?

But Hermione couldn't betray an Order spy.

"What's wrong?" Malfoy asked, watching her expression.

"Nothing," Hermione said quickly. "You're back earlier than I thought you would be. Do you want to have lunch together..?"

Malfoy looked unsatisfied by her change of topic. Hermione found herself hoping, cowardly, that he might just decide to use Legilimency on her. Then he would know everything, and it wouldn't be her fault at all. But Malfoy gave no sign of wanting to force his way into her mind.

"What's the matter?" Malfoy insisted, tugging her closer. "Talk to me."

"I'm just tired."

That had been an excuse that had always worked at the safe house. Nobody cared enough to push for more of a reason than that, but Malfoy clicked his tongue, clearly displeased.

"Hermione."

"No, no, it's fine," Hermione said, frantic now with her dwindling supply of excuses. He was stubborn, and she wanted him to drop it. "I'm just tired. I missed you. Now we can relax together..."

She slid along the cushion to his side, then rested her head on his shoulder. She picked up a book she'd left here earlier and opened it to her bookmark.

Malfoy just watched her for a moment. Hermione was sure that the bit of her forehead that was visible to him over the top of her book was pink. She was no master of secrecy.

He pressed his mouth to the top of her head.

"You don't want to tell me?" he coaxed quietly. His breath warmed her hair. He held her hand.

"I'm sure you could read my mind, if it matters that much to you," Hermione said.

"I was taught that it's very unromantic for gentlemen to read the thoughts of ladies."

Hermione gave him a skeptical look. She doubted propriety dictated Malfoy's security measures. He breathed a laugh, like he knew what she was thinking.

"That ring around your neck tells me the important stuff," he admitted. "Mostly, it lets me know if you're in danger. Afraid for your life. Nothing else though. All the other stuff in your head, I want to hear from your own pretty mouth."

He kissed her playfully at these last words, then nosed at her cheek. Hermione turned towards him, smiling in spite of herself. He was so affectionate, so obviously starving for contact between them.

"Then don't *pry*," Hermione scolded, still leaning into his kisses.

Malfoy bit her cheek lightly and she giggled.

"I'll ask again later," he said, leaning back into the sofa.

Hermione picked her book back up, hoping that this would be the end of it.

Malfoy watched her as she read, gently rubbing her shoulder with his thumb as she did so. His head swayed slightly every now and then, reminding her that he was drunk.

Really, she ought to be enjoying this more. Who knew when she'd next get to see Malfoy in this state?

"I have a question," he said abruptly, after a moment.

"What is it?" Hermione asked warily.

"Your hair isn't as curly as it was back in school. Did you do that on purpose?"

Hermione gave him a strange look.

“What?”

“Your hair,” Malfoy repeated. “It’s not as curly as it was.”

“How do you even remember what my hair used to look like?”

“I have a good memory.”

Hermione was baffled by Malfoy’s curiosity about her curls. Maybe it was because his own hair was stick straight and usually neatly combed to the side.

“It takes some work to make the curls all—round and defined,” she explained. “They don’t just look like that unless I style them a bit.”

“Like brushing? Can I brush your hair again?”

Hermione giggled.

“You’re actually not supposed to brush curly hair. That’s part of why they’re kind of fuzzy right now...”

“What?” He sat up. “How come you didn’t tell me?”

“I mean, it doesn’t really matter,” Hermione said, laughing at the look on his face. “It’s not your fault for not knowing. Most people who don’t have curly hair don’t realize—”

“I want to do it properly,” Malfoy said. “I *care* about doing it properly.”

Something twisted in Hermione’s heart, just below the surface. She tried to ignore it.

“I’ll show you how to do the hair,” she said, grateful for the diversion. “Come on.”

~

“Okay, so—“

Hermione cupped water in her hands and started working it through her hair.

Malfoy watched her raptly.

It was so weird being here with him like this. He was watching her do her hair—how bizarre. Had he never had a girlfriend with curly hair? He said a woman had never stayed with him here.

"Ok," Hermione said, scrunching the wet hair a bit. "So—when it's wet like this, it clumps into pieces. See?"

She used two fingers to carefully lift a wet, already-coiling piece of water-darkened brown hair.

Malfoy nodded. His grey eyes were serious. Hermione felt a little flutter of nerves in her stomach under the attention. She cleared her throat.

"I haven't done this in a while," Hermione said, avoiding his gaze. "At the safe house I usually kept it tied up. But let's see... you've got no gel or hair cream or anything here so I'll skip that part. Now I just sort of scrunch the water out with a towel..."

Malfoy handed her a towel and watched as she carefully squeezed her hair.

"What next?" he asked.

"That's pretty much it," Hermione said, turning from the mirror to face him. "It just has to air dry now."

She made an awkward sort of *ta-da* motion with her hands.

"And you don't brush it at all?" Malfoy asked, standing up from his spot on the edge of the tub. He moved closer, circling her and examining her hair.

"I can brush it before I clump it," Hermione said, smiling up at him. She felt very small when he stood over her like this, close and attentive. "Not after, though. It has to dry like this, in sections. I have to be careful to not really touch it."

"Alright," Malfoy said thoughtfully. "Okay. We'll be careful not to touch it."

Hermione giggled at his earnestness, and Malfoy smiled down at her.

It was almost too easy to pretend that there was nothing outside this bathroom. Wouldn't that be amazing? If there was no war, no Nott, no Shacklebolt. That the messy, bloody chessboard of Hermione's life was instead as clean and simple as the white marble counter here in Malfoy's bathroom.

Hermione was used to pretending; she was good at it. It was a helpful coping strategy in the years of the war, when reality felt too horrific to accept.

For example, one of her favorite things to pretend back at the safe house was that she *wasn't* organizing Healing supplies because of injured soldiers—no, that would be awful! She was organizing them into little first aid kits, ones that she would give out to everyone before the Christmas Quidditch match at the Weasley's. *Just a precaution*, she would say, and everyone would tease her for worrying.

Another useful one was pretending she was on a camping trip with friends. That was the only reason they were living in the cramped safe house, and that was the only reason she was

using a shower shared by thirty others, with green mold on the tub and with cheap, occasionally homemade soap for shampoo. Just a camping trip. She would be home soon.

So right now, Hermione looked up at Malfoy and pretended they were just—dating. She was in his bathroom (even in her fantasy it had to be *his* bathroom, as she would never have been able to afford a house with a bathroom like this), because he'd asked to see her curly hair routine.

"I have an idea," she said, searching for another diversion for them. "While my hair dries, let's—come up with more decoration ideas for your room?"

Malfoy was, unsurprisingly, very on board with this suggestion.

They went to the bedroom and Hermione paced around slowly, examining everything.

"I've never had to furnish a room before," Malfoy said.

"At all?" Hermione asked, surprised. "You've never—moved in with someone?"

"No," Malfoy answered simply. "Have you?"

"Um, no."

"This is both of our first times living with someone else, then."

They were both twenty-four—was it normal to have not moved in with someone before, at this age? In a world without a war, of course.

Malfoy slid his hands into his pockets and looked around the room and Hermione tried to see him as a girl might see her new live-in boyfriend. He was very attractive. She'd thought so even when he'd been a Death Eater prisoner and she an Order guard. Hermione actually thought that he looked even more handsome when he was a little drunk like this. More relaxed, his usually closed expression warmer and easier to read.

"Do you want to pretend like we're—decorating a new flat together?" she asked. "As though we're about to move in. And we're trying to decide on furniture—"

She felt stupid almost immediately.

Good lord, was this what Stockholm Syndrome was like? Gradually losing track of what was and was not something embarrassing to say? Wanting to open herself up to Malfoy, so he could see all her complicated inner workings, even the miswired ones...

"Nevermind," she said hastily.

But Malfoy was already speaking.

"Yeah," he said, surprising her. He sounded interested. "Let's play."

Hermione shot him a look out of the corner of her eye, trying to see if he was mocking her.

“Okay,” she said, clearing her throat. “So—we can sort of decide on the premise. It’s like playing pretend, when you were little? We pick characters and stuff.”

“You pick first.”

Hermione’s heart jumped oddly with excitement. She’d never played the game with anyone else before. The fact that Malfoy was drunk made it easier to let herself fall into the old habit. She told herself that he wouldn’t even remember this later, after all. Low stakes.

“Okay,” she said eagerly. “I want to pretend to be a muggle couple, then. There’s no wizarding war, or anything.”

“Sounds perfectly lovely. And we just purchased this flat?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “Okay, and we just walked in. And maybe you’d say something like—”

“I had some starter furniture brought over,” Malfoy said, catching on. “But I figured it would be a bit bare, at least until you started picking some of the decorations.”

He did a convincing job of looking around the room with crossed arms, as though very aware that it was a blank canvas until his woman came in and worked some magic.

Hermione stared at him. For a moment she felt like she could reach out and touch this version of Malfoy. Her muggle boyfriend.

“It’s good starter furniture,” she finally said. “I think maybe we should start with—new drapes.”

Malfoy went to the window and assessed the curtains. Hermione tried not to giggle.

“You’re perfectly right, my peach. We ought to—”

“*My peach?*” Hermione repeated, laughing. “Is that how you think couples talk?”

“I always call you that,” he said, play-irritated. “As I’m sure you remember from all the time we’ve spent together. And I was saying—you’re perfectly right. What sort of drapes would you prefer? Something silk?”

“Hm,” she said. “Silk would be terribly expensive.”

“Good thing you married someone terribly wealthy.”

“Oh, we’re *married*?” she giggled.

Malfoy gave her a quick smile. He was about to say something else, evidently planning on staying in character, but he swayed a little as he took a step away from the curtain and stumbled inelegantly on a corner of the rug. Malfoy swore under his breath and Hermione tried not to laugh.

"You seem a little drunk, dearest," she said innocently. "Did you have one too many at the office again?"

"Er," Malfoy said slowly. He appeared to be thinking about what his job might possibly be, in this other world. "Yes. The office. I—had a long day at the... Ministry? The muggle Ministry."

"Ah yes, the muggle Ministry," Hermione said. "Prestigious and well-paying."

"I need to keep you in style, darling. This flat isn't cheap, you know."

"Oh, I can only imagine. Thank you very much for working so hard to take care of us."

She'd said the last sentence teasingly, but Malfoy seemed to be very impacted by it. He looked at her and a brief, hungry expression crossed his features.

"I really love hearing you say that," he said.

"Well—I'm glad," she said, trying not to stammer. That *look* in his eyes. "Thank you. Especially since all your hard work at the muggle Ministry allows me to, um... pursue my passion of running a bookshop."

"A bookshop," Malfoy said, like he was considering the idea. "That makes sense. It sounds like this bookshop isn't very profitable?"

"Oh, not at all," Hermione said very seriously. "We're in the red every single quarter, my love. I give away all the books to underprivileged students."

He laughed.

"Of course you do. My darling bleeding heart."

He swayed slightly, then took a seat on the bed, looking around the room.

"I hate to interrupt our afternoon, little wife," he said. "But the room is spinning, and that's getting in the way of my interior design sense. I think I ought to take a sobriety potion."

Hermione laughed. Malfoy informed her that the tonic was in his nightstand drawer and she fetched it for him. He kissed her hand when she handed him the bottle, then downed the vial and closed his eyes, waiting for the potion to set in.

"I like this game," he said. "We should play it more often."

Hermione was pleased.

"I'm surprised," she said. "I thought your universe was exactly as you wanted it to be. No pretend necessary."

"Things could always be better."

Malfoy's hair was a bit mussed, his mouth twisted into a slight grimace as he leaned back and waited for the tonic to work its magic. His face was relaxed, his eyes still closed.

Another pang of guilt rose in her but she quelled it. She hummed nervously instead, pulling at the hem of her shirt.

"You're keeping something from me," Malfoy said without opening his eyes. "I can tell you're anxious."

He was sobering up. Hermione licked her lips, then chewed the bottom one.

"No," she said. "I'm not."

"You're not a good liar."

"Let's not talk about it," she said hopelessly, twisting her shirt in her fingers. "You said you wouldn't pry."

He opened his eyes. He was definitely a lot more sober now. His face was serious, his expression harder to read. Hermione suddenly felt a little embarrassed—what did he think of the game now that he was no longer drunk?

"Come here," Malfoy said, gesturing her over with a tip of his head.

She walked over to the bed, standing before him. He reached forward and pulled her a little closer, so she stood right between his spread knees.

"You know you can tell me anything, don't you?" he said, playing with her fingers.

Hermione kept her lips sealed, and a flicker of displeasure crossed Malfoy's handsome features.

He pulled her even closer. The front of her thighs pressed against the mattress.

"If you don't tell me what bothers you," he said, his voice quiet and coaxing. "Then I can't fix it for us, can I?"

Hermione closed her eyes, like a child hoping that blocking their own vision hid them from the world, too. Maybe that was the only way to keep his questions at bay. She felt Malfoy touch her face, felt his fingers stroke her cheek. He placed the pad of one finger on her bottom lip, parting her mouth. She heard him exhale a little.

Then he moved his hand to her necklace. He slipped a finger under the thin chain of her necklace and gave it a light tug. Hermione's eyes flew open at the gentle bite of metal on her skin.

"Tell me, Hermione," he demanded.

"I just feel guilty," she whispered. She would tell him just enough to get him to drop it. She would give him half-truths. "I think I'm disappointing the Order."

"By being here?"

He sounded mollified, which encouraged Hermione to continue giving him choice bits of the truth.

"Yes. I think—they'd be disgusted to know I'm not trying harder to escape. Like I'm a traitor."

"You shouldn't feel guilty," Malfoy said in a soothing, low voice. "You're so good. You deserve good things. You could never do anything wrong..."

Her heart wrenched at his kind words. She couldn't remember the last time anyone told her that she deserved good things. How come she had to be kidnapped before hearing someone say it?

"Let's talk about something else," Hermione whispered.

"Hermione..."

"I'm begging you."

Malfoy's face had been serious and calm, but at the word *begging* his eyelids flickered, as though a little pulse of desire had caught him off guard.

"Not fair," he said. "You know I like that word."

Hermione did know. She understood him very well, actually. Sometimes she wondered if this type of dynamic wasn't what *she* wanted too. It seemed to come very naturally to her.

It made sense to give him what he wanted right now, didn't it? To get him to stop asking her...

Hermione leaned a little closer and nuzzled her nose against Malfoy's cheek, then kissed his jawbone.

Malfoy's jaw clenched, and that was rather sweet. She breathed happily against his skin and then moved to kiss him full and sweet on the mouth. His lips were soft and instantly responsive. She suckled softly on his bottom lip and Malfoy shuddered against her.

He kept his hands stiffly unmoving at his sides—perhaps remembering that she'd asked him to not touch her last time. But Hermione picked up one of his hands and let him put it on her hip. He gripped her tightly.

"Hands are okay?" he asked, breathing a little harder. "Can I bring you up here..."

Hermione nodded and he dragged her up onto the bed with him. He pushed her legs apart so that one of her knees was on either side of his hips, and she was straddling him. She kept herself elevated a bit so she didn't press herself fully to his lap.

Malfoy stared up at her, reverent. His lips were parted and his grey eyes looked almost clear, illuminated at this angle. It made it easier to see his pupils dilate, huge and black.

"You're perfect," he whispered to her. The praise sent a thrum of happiness through her. Malfoy slid his hand down her hip. "Just look at you."

He pressed his face against her skin, kissing her collarbone, then her neck. His kisses were *more* than they'd been before—open-mouthed and somehow more viscerally starving. Was it because they'd been playing that game? Was Malfoy, like her, thinking about a life where they might have been flat-shopping? They would have been much more physical already, in that world...

Her skin sang under the gentle, working pressure from his mouth, under the increasingly tight vice of his fingers around her hip and waist. Hermione's legs quivered but she didn't dare let herself relax onto his lap. If she did, her center she would be pressed to the front of Malfoy's trousers. Separated only by a few flimsy pieces of fabric.

Malfoy seemed acutely aware of this as well, though it was clear that the prospect was intensely desirable rather than nerve-wracking for him.

The kisses on her neck and chest grew a little more frantic, and his breaths came harder. He nipped her skin a little hard, on her throat, and then hummed quickly and apologetically before kissing the sting away.

Malfoy's fingers slid up to her ribcage, then his thumb gently rubbed at the side of her breast, over the soft fabric of her jumper. Hermione didn't protest. He was good at this, was good at touching and toying and making her feel good.

"Sit on me," Malfoy pleaded, biting down on her shoulder. "Hermione—sit on me—"

She finally did, and Malfoy groaned in ecstasy at the contact. He dropped both hands to the flare of hips and pushed down, pressing her body harder to him.

His cock was very, very hard. Hermione felt it fully, the shape and curve and bulk of it, pressed against her own center. Her trousers were soft and for lounging, made of thin cashmere, and with something hard pressed between her legs she felt closer to nude than clothed.

"Yes," Malfoy whispered, dropping his head to rest his forehead against her chest. His shoulders shook slightly. Malfoy's cock twitched under her, responding to the pressure and warmth of Hermione's weight. Malfoy groaned. "Oh, fuck. Yes."

Hermione started panting a little, her brain almost short-circuiting with the feeling of something other than her own fingers touching her between her thighs. And now she had a cock pressed against her there. She felt it, each time it twitched or hardened—and oh God, sitting on him meant *pressure on her clit*—and it *felt so good*. Nobody had touched her there in years—Hermione realized with distant shock that she was wet, and then—

Malfoy dragged her body forward by the hips, causing her to rock against him. Bright, firecracker bursts of pleasure fired in Hermione's brain at the friction and she gasped, bracing herself on his shoulders so she didn't collapse.

This reaction was evidently like a drug to Malfoy. He groaned and licked a slow stripe from her throat to her jaw.

"What a *good fucking girl*," Malfoy whispered into her ear, holding her quivering body down against his. Her hips twitched of their own accord and Malfoy made a delighted, cooing moan. "Look at that. Does that feel good?"

Hermione nodded silently, her lips shaking and pressed closed. She didn't let herself moan—partially because she didn't want to acknowledge how much she was enjoying this (had she always wanted a man that was like this? Had *he* made her want this, or had she always secretly needed someone to praise her, to take care of everything?) but also because Hermione was simply used to making no noise at all when feeling pleasure. Back at the safe house, she'd masturbated silently, bringing herself to furtive, unsatisfying orgasms as fast as she could.

But what was happening now was *very* different.

There was nothing furtive or unsatisfying about this. Malfoy seemed like he could spend an entire eon here with Hermione seated on him. His full attention was on her, and every shock of pleasure he delivered to her was both deliberate and hair-raisingly electric.

He gripped her hips so hard that she felt each of his fingers digging into her through the thin fabric of the trousers. He'd dressed her in them this morning. Malfoy took care of everything.

With another slow, rolling motion, he tugged her hips forward so her center ground against his lap. Hermione's eyes rolled back and she shook, and between her legs she felt Malfoy's cock twitch insistently at the sight of her reaction.

Hermione was shaking so hard that her vision was vibrating.

Her body was out of her own control, her muscles trembling like leaves on a tree. Malfoy was *so good* at working her up. He was ruthlessly effective and well-paced, and Hermione was already eagerly anticipating the moment when these steady, grinding rolls would culminate in what would certainly be an earth-shattering orgasm. Nothing like the meager ones she used to give herself, in the darkness of her safe house room. No, the lights here were on, and there was a man holding her hips, and—

Abruptly, unthinkably, Malfoy stopped moving. Hermione's hips halted their pleasurable, aching motion, and she hissed in frustration.

She tried—automatic and instinctive—to rock forward again onto him, searching for friction, but Malfoy's hands were iron and kept her hips pinned in place.

So *mean of him*, now that he'd teased her to this extent, not moving her anymore—

"What?" she gasped. "Why?"

Malfoy's eyes were as black as a shark's, only a thin, starving ring of silver around the pupil. His cheeks were flushed, his eyelids heavy, his jaw slack. He looked blissed out, his expression almost vicious with pleasure. Like everything he needed and wanted was about to be delivered to him.

"Tell me how good you're going to be," Malfoy said. "Tell me right now."

He tightened his hold on her hips and Hermione whimpered. He was big and steady—so strong, and if only he would use that strength to take hold of her and rock her back and forth again—

"Tell me," Malfoy snarled, and Hermione forced her mouth open.

"I'll be so good for you," Hermione pleaded. Malfoy's teeth clenched into a grimace of pleasure and she kept talking. "So good, *so good*. I'll do what you like, just like I promised."

## Chapter 16

A heady, roaring rush of victory surged through Malfoy. He had never experienced pleasure as total as this. His need for control, his obsessive fixation, his need to *provide* and to *give*—every one of his dark desires was being fed, every chord of his psyche rang with pleasure.

Hermione's cheeks were so pink. Her eyes were half-closed, and what was visible of her irises was shining and bleary. So beautiful.

"Is this what you'd be like if you were my wife?" Malfoy asked softly. He pushed her hips down, pressing her down harder on him. "Maybe we shouldn't be doing this on the bed, darling. We haven't even finished decorating our flat yet."

Hermione's hips tried to rock forward but he kept her still. Malfoy leaned forward to press kisses to her chest, just above the swell of her breasts, and she shuddered when he licked her skin.

"Look at you squirm," he cooed, looking up at her. "Are you getting excited? Do you need me to make you feel good?"

Eye contact seemed to be too much for Hermione—she squeezed her eyes shut even as her lips parted at the feeling of his tongue on her skin.

"Eyes open," Malfoy said at once, and she did as he said.

"Okay," she whispered dizzily.

"You're being so good," Malfoy breathed. "Working so hard for me."

"Yes." She shook when he pressed her harder down on his lap. "Yes, yes..."

"I'm going to put my hand around your neck."

"Yes, okay..."

Malfoy wrapped his fingers around her throat, his eyes drifting half-lidded when she gasped.

"You like the way I handle you?" he asked. "It seems like it's growing on you."

Hermione shivered, her lips parting silently and closing over and over. Malfoy wanted to bite her lip, wanted to hold that pink, wet tongue between his fingers until she whined.

"Words," he said instead.

"Yes," she whispered.

"How much do you like it, darling?"

Hermione didn't seem to want to answer that.

"Go on," he whispered. He smiled. "Go on, sweetheart. You can tell me how much you like it."

Malfoy reached between Hermione's legs and pressed two fingers to where he knew her clit must be.

Hermione choked at once, shuddering and slumping against him.

"I like it a lot," she whimpered. "I like it—"

"I know," Malfoy cooed, pressing his fingers against her harder. "I like it too, darling. But you already know the things I like, don't you? Why don't you tell me what they are."

Hermione swallowed. Her face was tipped up to make room for Malfoy's large hand around her throat.

"You like when I'm good," she said. "And you like grabbing my neck."

"What else?" he asked.

Her hips twitched against his lap.

"You like dressing me," Hermione whimpered. "And—undressing me—"

"And?"

"I don't know," she whispered frantically. Hermione's hips were rocking perceptibly now. "I don't know, why are you making me say all of them—"

"Because I like telling you what to do. Don't I?

Hermione let out a faint, petal-soft whimper. She nodded.

Malfoy stared at her. The sight of her like this made his cock strain against his trousers.

"Take off your shirt," he said, releasing her neck.

Hermione swayed forward slightly at the loss of his hand supporting her, but he kissed her and she rebalanced with one hand on his chest.

She was wearing a soft cashmere jumper and just a little slip of a shirt underneath. All day Malfoy had noticed—of course he had noticed—the way her nipples had gently poked through the fabric. He hadn't let his gaze linger. But now, as Hermione tugged the jumper jerkily up over her head, Malfoy stared freely. He had been patient, after all.

Hermione's midriff was lightly freckled, the sweeps of dark dots arrestingly beautiful against her pale golden skin. The lines of her ribs showed still, but less than they had when he'd found her in the safe house all those months ago. He'd fed her well.

And then, finally, the hem of her shirt lifted over her breasts.

Malfoy made an involuntary, ragged sigh of relief.

*Yes.*

Another wall between them, finally broken. He'd seen her chest. Now there would be no more shy turning away from him, no arms hugging herself in embarrassment. Her tits were his, along with the rest of her.

Malfoy pressed his hand to her stomach, then dragged it slowly higher. Her breasts were so lovely. The size of a small handful and so soft that Malfoy worried she might bruise like a peach if he bit her. He would have to be gentle.

Malfoy kissed her mouth, then her chin, then dropped his head and kissed the top of one of her breasts. Hermione shuddered. He kissed her other breast, then licked a wet, dragging line from one nipple to the other.

Hermione whined quietly. Malfoy pressed his hand to his cock, trying to alleviate some of the aching pressure.

"Get on your back," he breathed.

"Are—you going to—?"

"Do as you're told."

Hermione did.

"Take off your trousers," Malfoy said quietly, palming his erection through his trousers.

"Malfoy," she said, a little frantic. Her eyes held an edge of fear. "Malfoy—are you going to—?"

"Am I going to what?" he asked softly.

Hermione's eyes darted between his. She didn't seem capable of making herself say it.

"Am I going to fuck you?" he asked. "Is that what you're wondering?"

The flush on Hermione's face and chest deepened. She didn't speak.

"No," Malfoy said, stroking her hip. "I'm not. But I'm going to put my hand between your legs. Is that alright?"

Hermione nodded quickly, dizzily, then slid her thumbs under her waistband and tugged her trousers off. Her underwear was light purple. They rode high on her hips, the thin edges delicately laced.

Malfoy tried to part her thighs, but they were clamped tight together.

"What's wrong?" he asked softly, stroking her thigh.

Hermione just swallowed. The color on her cheeks was bright and pink. She looked embarrassed.

Malfoy clicked his tongue lightly. He pulled her legs apart once more and this time she didn't resist.

It became immediately clear what she was trying to hide.

"Good girl," Malfoy breathed.

Her underwear was soaked in the center, shining with her wetness. The lavender fabric was sodden and sticky, clinging over the folds of her cunt, nearly transparent.

Hermione's face was red. Malfoy rubbed her lower stomach lovingly.

"Don't be embarrassed," he said. "Look at this pretty mess. Did you make it just for me?"

Hermione's mouth was slack, she seemed to be hanging onto sanity by just a hair. Through her underwear Malfoy saw her cunt clench.

He kissed her stomach again and then sat up and rested a broad palm just over her pubic bone. He took his time, enjoying the feel of the lacy edge of her underwear under his hand, the way her muscles twitched. Then he extended his thumb lower, letting it brush just over the visible little nub of her clit, poking through the sodden fabric.

Hermione arched instantly, violently up against his hand. She made a noise he'd never heard her make before.

"Yeah," he breathed. "Is that the spot?"

He pressed against her clit once more. Hermione's jaw dropped open further and her eyes squeezed tightly shut.

"Malfoy," she whispered, and the word was more tremor than anything else. Her hips thrust a little. "Malfoy, please."

"Keep saying my name. I like that."

Malfoy dragged his thumb up over her clit again, firmer and slower this time, feeling the nub catch a little as he pushed up against it. Hermione squirmed.

"Malfoy," she said again, a frantic edge to it this time.

His jaw clenched tight.

"I think you might come right now," he whispered. He had to fight to keep his tone steady. "Just like this. With just my thumb moving slowly on your clit, over your underwear. Is that really all it takes, kitten?"

Hermione made no noise, only shuddered, her mouth open in a silent moan. Her eyes had rolled back.

"I wonder how long you'll last?" he asked, stroking his thumb against her. "A minute? Half a minute?"

"Malfoy," she gasped. "Oh my god—oh god—"

"Maybe it's *seconds*, not minutes? Seems like my thumb will be too quick."

He curled his index finger to drag just his knuckle, feather-light, over the tip of her clit. Hermione's hips thrust pathetically upwards.

"Please," she begged. Her cheeks were hot and bright pink. "Please, again, again."

"I'm going to count how many touches it takes for you to come. I think it will be... fifteen. What's your guess?"

Hermione didn't speak, just tried to push her hips higher.

"Your guess," Malfoy demanded.

"I don't know," she whined. "Ten. Ten—"

He ran his knuckle again over the quivering peak of her clit.

"Again—" she begged, and Malfoy obliged.

"Three. Good girl, listen to you whine. There's four... now five..."

Hermione's eyes closed on the sixth.

Malfoy went a tiny bit faster. Seven, eight, nine.

She groaned gutturally at ten. The sound was raw and un-self conscious, rended from the deepest part of her.

Eleven. Twelve.

"I'm going to come," Hermione said frantically. Her hips thrust up, humping the air mindlessly, seeking contact on her clit. "Malfoy—please—please I'm going to—"

"Thirteen—"

Hermione screamed, loud and hard.

"Fuck," Malfoy hissed, pressing his free hand to his cock, where it strained painfully against his zipper. With his knuckle he dragged against Hermione again and again, applying more pressure, helping her ride her climax. Her hips were thrashing; Malfoy pinned her down to keep her still, so he could keep his hand rubbing on her a little longer.

Hermione's scream broke into an overstimulated sob. Tears shone on her face, her hips still shook violently with the force of her orgasm. Under Malfoy's hand he felt her cunt tighten and relax, tighten and relax, spasming with each wave. He rubbed two fingers firmly in a circle over her clit and Hermione made a ragged, high noise of oversensitivity.

"Oh—oh," she gasped. Her hand found his, pushed weakly at it. "Stop—too much—"

Malfoy took his hand off her and licked her fluids from his fingers.

Hermione was glowing. Boneless. Her eyelashes were wet with tears and her chest heaved.

Malfoy could barely see through the fog of arousal. Adrenaline pumped through him—he'd made her *come*. Hermione had come in *his bed*, with his fingers pressed to her soaking underwear—she'd screamed with his knuckle pressed to her clit.

"Close your eyes," he gritted out, undoing his belt with shaking fingers.

Hermione closed her eyes at once, squeezing them shut. His balls tightened further at her docile obedience.

Malfoy unbuttoned the top of his trousers and tugged them down just enough to wrap his hand around his cock. He needed to come. It felt like he was seconds away from exploding in his pants—he'd never gotten this turned on from watching a woman orgasm before.

"I won't touch you," he soothed, when she twisted in alarm at the sound of his zipper. His breathing was heavy, it was difficult to speak clearly. "Don't worry. I promise not to get any on you."

He didn't want to scare her, wasn't sure he could control the way he looked just now, how hard and greedy his expression would be as he fucked his hand to the sight of her soaked underwear, to the memory of her screams.

Her eyes remained squeezed shut; she was so good at following instructions. Malfoy imagined slotting himself at her entrance for the first time. *Look down*, he would command. *Watch yourself take all of me*.

And when she was close: *Don't come yet*. She would be on the brink but he would let it dangle in front of her, and she'd hold it in like a good girl. *You don't get to come yet*—

Malfoy's orgasm came suddenly and without warning.

Pleasure hit blinding, fever pitch and Malfoy's balls spasmed, then he was coming harder than he ever had before. He gasped and his head dropped forward. His hips thrust jerkily of their own volition as he emptied himself onto the bedspread, stroking himself in rough, uneven motions with a shaking hand, the pulses of pleasure endless and throbbing.

Hermione's eyes remained closed, squeezed tight, as though bracing herself to feel him spatter on her. But of course he didn't—he'd promised.

"You did such a good job," he gasped, shaking as he wrung the last dregs of come from his cock, dripping and white onto the sheets. "You did such a good job for me."

~

Malfoy had predicted that, when Hermione finally caved and let him touch her between the legs, she would require very gentle care afterwards.

He had been mostly correct. Hermione was obviously overwhelmed, though the resurgence of guilt and confusion he'd worried she'd exhibit wasn't as bad as he'd feared.

She rolled to her side, shaking a little from the physical aftershocks. She pressed her hand between her legs like she couldn't believe the things she'd felt.

"Are you alright?" Malfoy asked. He crawled next to her, drawing her to his chest.

"Yes," she said, though the answer seemed breathless and automatic. "Yes."

He gathered her a little closer and smoothed his hand lightly up and down her back.

"My sweet girl," he said softly, his eyes closing. "Was that fine for you? Did that feel good?"

She nodded twice, the motions drowsy.

Her tremors lessened after a few minutes. She clung to his shirt, which was still on despite the fact that his belt was off and his zipper undone. Malfoy pulled up his trousers, trying not to jostle her too much.

"So good for me," he whispered, pressing his lips to her curls, which were now sweat-damp. She tucked her face against his chest. "You did such a good job, didn't you? My favorite thing..."

He said whatever came into his head, keeping a soothing stream of whispers against her hair. It seemed to relax her.

"I helped the Order today," Malfoy mumbled into her temple. "I forgot to tell you."

"You did?" she asked, turning her face up to look at him.

"Yes," he said. "I stopped an attack. Isn't that nice?"

Hermione wriggled and tried to sit up. Malfoy let her. He leaned against the headboard of the bed and rubbed his face. He was sleepy now too.

"What attack?" she whispered eagerly. She wrapped a comforter around herself.

"Mm. One near the Hogsmeade house."

"When?"

“Just after I left the Commander.”

She looked shocked.

“Weren’t you *drunk*? ”

“Only a bit.”

Her face turned prim, and Malfoy had to stop himself from laughing. She seemed struck with a sort of Puritanical disbelief that anyone would ever consider working while drunk.

“It wasn’t my finest hour,” he said. “But I didn’t have any trouble. Well—“

He remembered the injury on his arm.

The pain had been easy to ignore, first while drunk and then while an unclothed Hermione had been lying on the bed in front of him. Now, as though reminding him of his stupidity, the scar stung sharply. He needed to finish Healing it.

“Actually,” he said, unbuttoning his shirt. “Maybe you can help me take a look.”

He slid the sleeve off and Hermione covered her mouth when the wound came into view.

“It’s not that bad,” he protested, amused.

It really wasn’t. The injury was somewhat deep but he’d stitched it back together with a quick Healing spell already. The scar—angry, purple—would fade to white in the next month or so. His arm hurt; but his muscle fibers had been severed. That was to be expected. Surely, Hermione had seen worse.

But she seemed very impacted by the sight of him hurt. She touched the skin right next to the injury. There was dried blood there that he’d forgotten to clean off.

“If this had hit you twenty centimeters to the right, it would have punctured your heart,” she said, doing a poor job of sounding indifferent.

“I wouldn’t have let that happen. I cheated out, so it hit my shoulder.”

She was pale and kept staring at the dried blood.

“Are you worried about me?” he teased, leaning towards her. He kissed her and she bit his lip in irritated reprimand.

“No,” she protested unconvincingly, pushing him back so he leaned against the headboard again. “Here, let me see your arm. You idiot.”

He smirked and held still so she could examine him.

“Did you stitch the flesh? Or just the skin?” she asked.

“Of course both.”

“How sore is it? Dull pain or sharp pain?”

“Pretty sore. Sharp.”

“I’d recommend some nerve repair,” she said, feeling along his muscle. “I know a charm I can teach you.”

Malfoy watched her distractedly, pleased with the way she touched his skin, the way she worried about him. The blanket had fallen down a bit. He could see her breasts, soft and lovely. One was still a little pink where he’d lightly bitten her.

“A charm?” he repeated absently, enamored and distracted by the sight of her.

Hermione saw him staring and scoffed.

“Pay attention,” she grumbled, pulling the comforter higher.

Malfoy smiled lazily.

“Sorry. Here—you do the charm.” He summoned a spare wand from the dresser and handed it to her.

“Me?” she asked, taking the wand. “You’d give me a *wand*? I could attack you right now.”

“You wouldn’t succeed,” he said, closing his eyes and resting his head back against the headboard. “Go on. Let’s see your Healer skills. Or your combat skills, I suppose.”

After a moment, he felt her small hand rest on his chest. He opened an eye to watch her. Hermione was leaning forward, his wand in her hand, and carefully examining his bicep. After a moment, she directed a thin beam of golden light at the site of the injury.

Malfoy grunted. It stung. But when Hermione finished, he found the pain to be much less severe than before.

“Thanks,” he said with a smile, kissing her nose.

She snorted, then, as though curious, directed a Stinging Hex at his chest. Malfoy batted the spell away and turned part of the magic into a little puff of rose petals. He really needed to make sure Hermione never found herself on a battlefield.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Couldn’t have done that with the guy who hit your shoulder, could you?” she muttered, smoothing some petals from her lap.

Malfoy laughed. He shrugged his shirt back on.

“Did anyone else get hurt?” Hermione asked curiously.

“No. Well, nobody on the Order’s side.”

She looked at him, surprised.

“You mean—you injured Death Eaters?”

“I had to kill them,” he admitted, toying with a rose petal. “They would have gotten Tonks today otherwise.”

“You killed your own men? You rescued Tonks?”

“I didn’t rescue her,” he said, a little indignant at being made out to be an Order hero. “I stopped the attack, because that was the deal we made. I did it for you.”

Hermione’s eyes were shining. Malfoy decided maybe being an Order hero wasn’t the worst thing, if it kept her looking at him like *that*.

She clambered free of the twisted blankets and crawled into Malfoy’s lap. The wand he’d given her lay discarded on the bed. Malfoy levitated it back to his dresser but Hermione didn’t seem to care.

“Thank you,” she whispered, holding his face in her slim hands. Her eyes were wet. “Thank you. *Thank you.*”

Malfoy’s breath hitched.

“You’re welcome,” he said.

Hermione kissed his cheek, his nose, then his mouth.

Malfoy’s eyes drifted closed. Pleasure and joy thrummed in his chest.

“Thank you,” Hermione repeated, clinging to his neck and burying her face in his shoulder. “Thank you for doing that for me.”

The combination of her breathless gratitude and the extensive skin to skin contact was making Malfoy lightheaded. He exhaled quietly and adjusted Hermione so she wouldn’t feel his cock harden.

“You’re welcome,” he said again, turning his face to kiss the side of her head. He breathed in the scent of her hair. “You know I’d do anything for you.”

~

Malfoy hadn’t done so intentionally, but it was clear that delivering the news about Tonks had flipped something in Hermione.

Gone was the lingering shadow of guilt that had seemed to haunt her. Hermione curled against his chest, clinging tight to him, and didn’t even ask to put on clothes before falling

asleep. He woke with her warm body still pressed tight to his, his arm curled possessively around her waist.

“Good morning,” he said, when she stirred. “How are you feeling?”

“Mm,” Hermione mumbled.

Malfoy watched her blink the sleep from her eyes. Hermione exhaled lazily against his chest, sending a tingle running down his spine. He ran a finger up her ribs, smiling at the way she quivered in response.

“You didn’t put my clothes back on?” she mumbled, eyes still closed.

She sounded vaguely annoyed at his lax caretaking and Malfoy laughed. He crawled on top of her, pinning her down and biting at her neck until she giggled and thrashed.

“Very rude. Not: ‘*you didn’t put my clothes back on*’,” he said, holding her down. “How about: ‘*can you dress me now, please?*’”

Hermione was trapped below him, but she managed to turn her face into his shoulder and bite him. Malfoy smiled broadly.

“I’m waiting,” he teased.

“Can you dress me now, *please?*”

“Yes. Thank you for asking so nicely.”

He rolled off her and stood up, offering her a hand to help her up as well.

Hermione was still only in her little scrap of lavender underwear, and she made an instinctive effort to cover her chest with her hands once the blanket dropped from her. Malfoy clicked his tongue and nudged her hands down.

“Let’s get you in the bath,” he said, shrugging off his shirt. “Take off your underwear.”

Hermione didn’t obey right away. She followed him to the bathroom and watched as he turned the water on. He added foaming bubbles this time, to assuage her embarrassment at being nude.

Behind him, he heard Hermione shift slightly. He saw, out of the corner of his eye, her feet lift and then drop back down, and then purple underwear fall to the marble floor.

“Get in,” he said, shaking the soapy water from his hand. The temperature was warm and comfortable.

Hermione had dropped her hands from her chest—she held them lower now, guarding the spot between her legs from his view. Malfoy didn’t protest, but still watched unapologetically as she lifted one leg over the edge of the tub, then the other, trying her best to not flash Malfoy as she did so. Her face and neck were pink with embarrassment.

It was cute. The sight of her blushing—her breasts uncovered, the nipples in little points.

Hermione sank under the protective cover of bath bubbles, then visibly relaxed when Malfoy crouched next to her and started rubbing her neck. Her body was covered but for her slim, golden shoulders—peeking up over foamy bubbles—and the tops of her knees.

“Shoulders submerged,” he reminded her, pouring half a vial of Dittany into the fragrant bathwater.

Hermione slid lower.

“Good.”

When Hermione was bathed and towed, Malfoy turned on the shower for himself. He examined his bicep under the hot water. It had healed extraordinarily well.

Through the steamy glass, Malfoy saw that Hermione was waiting patiently outside the shower for him. He smiled, charmed.

“You can go back to the room if you like,” Malfoy said, wiping a circle on the glass to see her. She was wrapped in a towel, her hair in wet ringlets. “Though I do like seeing you so close. Are you sure you don’t want to get in here with me?”

Hermione stuck her tongue out at him. He smiled, then kissed his hand and pressed it to the glass.

“I’m going to dress you a little differently today,” Malfoy said, stepping out of the shower and grabbing a towel for his hair. “Is that alright?”

He walked to the closet and Hermione followed, her bare feet padding softly over the floors.

“I knew it was only a matter of time,” she said, settling onto one of the low benches by the coats.

Malfoy cast an amused eye at her.

“What do you mean?” he asked

“This must be where the skimpy dresses start making their appearance,” she said, rolling onto her tummy. One of Malfoy’s discarded ties was on the bench and she picked it up to fiddle with it. “Frilly underthings? Bells on my collar?”

“Cute,” Malfoy said with a snort. “But you should be careful of giving me ideas.”

He took one of his own white shirts from where it hung and handed it to her.

“How tame,” she said.

“I thought it would be sweet to see you in my clothes.”

Hermione smiled and put it on.

An hour later, they were settled in his office, getting into the routine of the day.

Malfoy sat at his desk and reviewed papers while Hermione lounged on the low green chaise next to him. She was reading a new book he'd given her. The servants had brought her a small square of cherry cake with her tea and she put the book down on occasion to take delicate bites out of the frosted pastry.

"Don't get any frosting on my sleeves," Malfoy hummed without looking up, nudging her chaise with the toe of his shoe.

He didn't actually care, he'd only said it to annoy her. Hermione gave an indignant snort and Malfoy smiled at her, propping his chin in his hand.

"You look nice," he said.

Hermione's legs were bare but for black knit socks that were too big for her—they scrunch down over her ankles. Malfoy's shirt was too large as well—the bottom of it dragged to her mid-thigh and his sleeves dangled past her wrists. She'd had to fold them up many times to get them to stop falling.

"You're the one who wanted me in this," she protested, struggling to cross her legs without showing him too much underwear.

"Mm. I know."

Hermione glared at him. She swiped a glob of cherry frosting off the cake with her finger and, making sure Malfoy was looking, wiped it deliberately down the front of her shirt. The frosting was pink and left a bright, creamy line against the starched fabric.

Malfoy clicked his tongue in disapproval.

"Come here," he said, putting his papers down.

Hermione stood and walked to him. Malfoy drummed his fingers on his desk, trying to give her a stern sort of look. But she seemed to have developed a good sense for when he was only playing at being strict. She scrunched her nose petulantly, looking unintimidated.

Malfoy lifted his hand and used the side of his finger to scoop up some of the mess on her shirt. He sucked the frosting off his knuckle. Hermione looked scandalized and he smirked.

"Don't be fussy," he said, leaning back. "Go on. Read. If you put frosting on my shirt again I'm going to make you roll around in it."

"Fine," she muttered. "Don't tease me about the shirt anymore though. It's too unwieldy for me to be able to keep it clean."

"Fine," Malfoy said with a smile.

Before she could walk back to her seat, Malfoy looped his finger under her necklace. He gave the chain a light tug and the new silver bell on her collar jingled merrily.

Hermione glowered at him.

“What?” he asked with a lazy smile, dragging her close and nipping her neck. “It’s sweet...”

Hermione managed only a few seconds of irritated silence before finally dissolving into giggles under his mouth.

## Chapter 17

Though there had been no shortage of would-be heroes and do-gooders in Hermione's life, there was one very specific thing that nobody had ever been able to do for her.

Nobody had ever, *ever* been able to thwart someone's death. Nobody. And in a world where violence seemed omnipresent, where blood spilled freely like paint onto the canvas, the fact that Malfoy was powerful enough to *keep someone alive* if he wished to was amazing to Hermione.

He had saved Tonks. Had *saved her*; when her number had been up and there had been hunters out for her kill. On a snowy mountain far away, Malfoy had changed fate.

Shacklebolt wouldn't have been able to save Tonks. Agreeing to the plan to break her out of captivity seemed more pointless—more *selfish*—than ever before.

No—so long as Malfoy could save lives in exchange for her staying with him, Hermione wouldn't budge. She would stick to their agreement. And if Nott and Kingsley thought her a traitor, so be it. Their judgment was easier to live with than deaths on her conscience.

Hermione curled more comfortably on the green chaise by Malfoy's desk. She was aware of him watching her, of the languid way he eyed her bare thighs. She shot him an annoyed look that was mostly for show, then pointedly tugged at the hem of her oversized shirt to try to cover her legs. He smiled lazily. He seemed to like the sight of her trying to cover herself just as much as he liked the sight of her skin.

"I thought you had to work," Hermione said. "You don't look to be doing much."

"I'm distracted."

"Can I have another piece of cake?"

He laughed.

"Of course."

Although Malfoy seemed very happy to have Hermione spend her days lounging on chaises and drinking tea, he didn't take the same luxurious approach towards his own life. He was a soldier, and didn't seem particularly inclined towards overindulgences.

At least, none other than her.

Hermione finished another novel and a half over the course of the afternoon while Malfoy pored over maps at his desk. On occasion, he took Floo voice correspondences. He always silenced the sounds of these conversations though, leaving Hermione to focus on her reading without much more than the low, muffled sound of his voice in the background.

She looked up from her book and gazed absently at one of the maps pinned on his wall. There were red lines all over the bottom edge of it. It seemed like the Death Eaters had cemented their hold on the northern border of France.

Hermione looked at Malfoy, who was presently studying the map as well. Was there something evolutionary, she wondered, about war-hungry men wanting their partners to be soft and unperturbed?

Malfoy was exceptionally intelligent, as she'd already known, and she enjoyed watching him work. It was always gratifying to see very smart people do things they were very good at.

He seemed to read at lightning speed, picking up and putting down missives and documents faster than she would have thought possible. She started to recognize the way his mind worked. The way he took in information rapidly, burning through pages like he was more fire than man—but then the way he sat with it after. He often set aside a document and glanced up at the ceiling or out the window; Hermione would see the way his eyes darted slightly back and forth, the way his jaw tightened and relaxed as he considered things. The way his mind seemed to run and skip like a river over strategies and implications and consequences, until he reached some decision or the other.

And then he moved on. Effective. Decisive.

Hermione liked that in a person.

“Does anyone know what happened yet?” she asked, stirring her tea. “With—the men who were hunting Tonks?”

“No. But I expect to see the report about their bodies sometime today.”

“You don’t think they’ll find out it was you?”

“Unlikely. I left a fairly clean scene.”

He didn’t seem worried, and so Hermione relaxed too.

After a while, Hermione grew restless. Never in a million years would she have guessed that she’d be the one to try to distract someone else from work, but she supposed he’d finally succeeded in his goal to give her nothing to do but rest.

“How much longer?” she wheedled, rising from her seat to pad over to Malfoy’s desk.

He set his quill down and turned his chair towards her.

“Bored?” he asked, leaning back.

“A little.”

“Come here.”

He spread his legs and touched his knee, and Hermione sat on his leg.

Malfoy shifted the chair back a few inches, then turned them both to face his desk again. He looked at his work over Hermione's shoulder, with his hand on her stomach.

She peered curiously at the papers but found he'd already cast a Blurring Charm on everything. Bored again, she tipped her head back to lean against his chest.

"What do you want to do?" he asked absently as he ticked notes on the page. His voice vibrated against her head.

"We've been inside all day," she said. "Maybe we can walk around the grounds?"

"Alright. Let me just finish this last thing."

She waited with some impatience. After a while, when she was starting to suspect he'd forgotten about her, she shifted on his lap. Malfoy snorted and readjusted her. She rebalanced and tried to find a spot on his lap she could move in a way that would get his attention more successfully.

He laughed.

"Come on," he said. "I'm almost done. Don't be impatient—"

She ground back against him and felt a satisfying—albeit brief—rush of victory when his words cut off in a sharp breath.

Malfoy put his quill down and grabbed her throat.

"Hey—" she protested.

"You have my attention," he said, dragging her back against him. "That's what you wanted, isn't it? What will you do with it now?"

With his other hand, he brushed aside the hanging fabric of his over-large shirt on her, exposing her thighs and underwear. Then he patted her lightly between the legs, twice. Like he was petting a cat.

"I wasn't even going to touch you again until you asked," he said. "But I suppose you are asking, now?"

Hermione looked down at his hand between her legs, which rested now just over the gusset of her underwear without moving.

"Are you?" Malfoy asked again.

His long fingers slipped under the band of her underwear.

"Yes," she said quickly. "Yes. I am."

But Malfoy removed his hand from her underwear. He adjusted her so she balanced more securely on his lap and then returned to his work.

Hermione was too embarrassed to let her outrage show. But he must have been able to tell.

"Good girls are patient," he said.

He was hard under her for the rest of the twenty minutes, which Hermione supposed was some small solace.

Hermione had been worried that the dynamic of everything would be different now that she'd let him touch her naked. Would it all twist into something ugly? All this possessiveness? Would he grow greedy and start treating her like some sort of sex doll?

But Malfoy was, if anything, more tender than ever before. And letting him touch her felt less like opening the floodgates than it did melting into him.

When Malfoy finished working, they went outside. Hermione had thought that he'd bring her right back to the bedroom, but he didn't seem in any particular hurry. He lay back in one of the reclining wooden chairs by the fountains with her between his legs, curled on her side and resting against his chest and stomach.

Just as Hermione was drifting off, a servant's voice abruptly interrupted the lazy afternoon.

"Master Malfoy," the man said. "Dolohov at the Floo, sir. He requests a meeting."

Malfoy checked his wristwatch.

"He didn't make an appointment," Malfoy said.

Hermione wanted to laugh—what was Malfoy, a dentist?—but somehow the way he said it indicated that scheduling time with Malfoy was an understood prerequisite. Perhaps it was one of the stringent security measures she'd come to realize he employed.

"Shall I tell him to make one, and return later?" the servant asked.

"It's fine," Malfoy said. "Have him wait while I prepare the wards."

The servant bowed and left.

Malfoy sat up, easing Hermione off him. He murmured a spell and a brief, vibrating hum went through the air. His security wards—they were exceptionally powerful. Hermione even saw them flicker momentarily into view: a web of glowing yellow threads, stretching all over the grounds. One even darted lightning-quick to the signet ring around her neck.

"I've never seen wards like those," Hermione said.

"I have rather a lot more people trying to kill me than the average person," he said, casting some indecipherable magic that presumably adjusted the wards for Dolohov's appearance. "These wards are ancestral. I tied them to my family blood, and to the materials of the old Manor. Bricks and fireplaces and things... they're built in everywhere throughout the house."

Hermione was unsettled at the implication that people were constantly outside the walls of Malfoy's house, waiting to get in.

He smiled at her.

"Don't worry," he said.

They returned to the house and Hermione sat on the sofa in the living room. Malfoy dropped next to her and propped his feet on the table.

The empty fireplace in front of them lit up, the flickering flames green and bright.

Dolohov's silhouette appeared in the fireplace. He didn't seem able to walk through the wards.

Malfoy made a gesture and the wards dissipated. The fire expanded, hot and tall, and more of the ward threads that Hermione had seen Malfoy tighten outside webbed out from the hearth. Then Dolohov stepped through, brushing ash off his shoulders.

"Sorry," he said. "I know you hate drop-ins. I have news about the wands."

"It's fine. Want anything to drink?"

"I brought something from Italy," Dolohov answered. He tossed a bottle of wine to Malfoy. "Hello, Granger."

Hermione gave him a little wave.

"Ah, Perricone," Malfoy said, looking at the wine label. "Good man."

"When in Sicily," Dolohov said, sitting in the chair across from Malfoy. "Did you get my report by owl?"

"Yes. You said you found Yaxley's wand?"

"Right," Dolohov said. "At his mum's house in Milan. I guess she hung onto it after he died. It wasn't a match. So that leaves only two possibilities left."

Malfoy hummed thoughtfully. One of his hands went—absently, automatically—to Hermione's hip.

She was very aware that she was dressed in extremely little. It was one thing when Malfoy and her were alone—but now Dolohov was seeing her in just an oversized men's shirt and a bell around her neck. He didn't seem too interested, though, luckily.

"We're getting closer," Malfoy finally said. "About time."

"Yeah," Dolohov said, lighting a cigarette. "It would have been faster if we could just scan for the wands. But since we've got to physically examine each one... well, that's why this has been such a costly endeavor, I suppose."

He looked at Hermione. His gaze was blunt and this time his eyes lingered on her necklace.

"I hate that I have to ask," Dolohov said to Malfoy. "But she was there that night too. Did you check her wand?"

Hermione stiffened.

"What does he mean?" she asked, looking at Malfoy. "What night?"

Malfoy just pulled her against his chest, resting his hand on the side of her cheek.

"Not a match," Malfoy said to Dolohov.

Dolohov looked skeptical, and Malfoy laughed. It vibrated against Hermione's cheek.

"What?" Malfoy asked, toying with Hermione's hair. "I'd have no reason to hide it—the Commander only wants the wand, not the bearer. I scanned her wand when I took her from Surrey. The logs are with Macnair, you can check."

Dolohov nodded.

"What night are you talking about?" Hermione asked Malfoy, craning to look up at him.

"Battle of the Ministry," he said, playing with the cord of her necklace.

"There were a lot of people there that night," Dolohov grumbled, blowing out smoke. "It's taken us three years to track down everyone's wands. What with some of them dying, or fleeing, or what have you..."

"Why don't you go to the kitchens and tell the staff what you want for dinner," Malfoy said to Hermione. "Go on."

"I want to hear more about this!"

"Yes, I know. That's why I'm excusing you from the room."

Hermione prickled with curiosity. The Battle of the Ministry? What could the Death Eaters possibly be doing, looking for the wands of everyone that had been there that night?

She stood and left the room, dragging her feet. She heard Dolohov make some remark and Malfoy respond with: *I don't like her to worry.*

Hermione went to the kitchens. It was her first time actually interacting with more than a passing servant. The chefs were already at work, preparing ingredients for dinner. They looked up and politely put their tools down when Hermione entered.

"Preference for dinner?" squeaked a house elf.

Hermione noticed that the elf was wearing clothes, which was pleasing. She was happy to know Malfoy paid them.

"Um—" Hermione looked back down the corridor, trying in vain to hear the conversation.  
"Could we do—some kind of chicken?"

"Of course. For Master Malfoy?"

"Same."

The house elf sent her off with a snack—a shallot tartlet and a little glass of pumpkin juice. Hermione hummed appreciatively as she nibbled the tartlet, then wandered back to the main house. She knew Malfoy would be anticipating her trying to sneakily hear more, so she didn't bother. She decided to walk around rather than sit and agonize over the mystery. Hopefully by the time she'd finished her snacks, Malfoy and Dolohov would be done talking.

Unfortunately, Hermione had forgotten that she'd planned on avoiding walking around alone, specifically for the reason of avoiding another one on one interaction with Nott.

She ran into him almost immediately, though luckily Pansy was with him as well.

They were standing in a tapestried hall by the orangery, Nott helping Pansy fasten a little bracelet to her wrist that had come undone. Pansy seemed to be giving him an earful about some wedding detail or the other, and neither of them noticed Hermione.

"—the McLaggens wouldn't snub an invite from us," Pansy said. "Clarice takes any opportunity she can get to bore everyone with the details of their Como renovation..."

"Must we discuss this?" Nott asked. "You know these little society details don't interest me."

There was a tense silence, wherein Hermione saw Pansy's expression flicker. She snatched her hand from Nott and did up the bracelet herself.

*"These little society details?"* Pansy hissed. Her voice was no longer that of a bored socialite, as though Nott had forced some other, deeper part of her to the surface. "You're the one who always tells me that this is the entire point of the war. That all the sacrifices are to let us maintain our way of life?"

"The point is to eke out *more* influence, Pans. When everything is over, when the dust has settled, don't you want to be on top?"

"No," she responded angrily. "I want things to be like they used to be. I don't even know why you and everyone pressed so hard for a war, if all you wanted was for the dust to settle again. The dust *was* settled! My family wasn't in debt, and nobody had died, and—"

Nott spotted Hermione.

"Hello," he said, over Pansy's shoulder.

Pansy turned. She sniffed.

"Hello, Granger." Pansy turned back to her bracelet. She cleared her throat. "Thank you, Theo. Much better now—it was a little loose—"

Pansy seemed on edge. It was clear the topic of war was not an easy one for her to discuss, which Hermione found odd. Pansy was on the winning side, after all. Her hands—gleaming red fingernails, filed to perfect ovals and clutching a small purse—shook.

Hermione had thought Pansy was comfortably settled into her undisturbed role as pureblood in the new order of things. Was that not the case? She had considered Pansy quite one-dimensional even since their Hogwarts days. Though—no, that wasn't fully correct. Pansy had surprised her once, long ago.

Pansy's eyes were hollow. Without another word, as though she was tired of speaking, she walked away. Down the hall and back towards the staircase, leaving Nott behind.

Nott made no move to follow.

"Her family's had a hard go of it," he said to Hermione, as though he felt he had to explain. "She just wants it to be like it was. The parties, the summer houses. She doesn't like thinking about the war."

"You haven't told her that you're in touch with the Order?" Hermione asked quietly, once she was sure Pansy was out of earshot. The accusation in her voice was obvious. "She might feel better, knowing you also aren't all for the Death Eaters..."

"My motivations aren't necessarily to end the war," he said vaguely. "And anyway, the fewer people know about my correspondence, the better."

Hermione gave him a disgusted look. She walked away, both to show her disapproval and also because she was sure the topic of Kingsley's deal was about to come up.

"No interest in staying for a chat?" Nott asked, following her. "I thought we had things to discuss."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said stiffly. "But I've decided I'm not interested."

Nott seemed taken aback.

"What?" he asked. "Why? Because of Draco?"

When Hermione didn't respond, Nott unexpectedly took hold of her wrist.

"You're turning your back on the Order," he asked, his eyes moving between hers. "*For him?*"

The disappointment and resentment in his face was starkly obvious.

"I'm *not* turning my back on the Order," Hermione said, trying to yank her hand free. "Just—I can't leave here yet. Tell Kingsley that, alright?"

"I'm offering you your freedom," Nott hissed. "Draco can't offer you that. Have his little affections made you forget that he *stole* you? You'd abandon your side?"

"I wonder how come nobody ever has anything to say about me throwing myself on the cross until I do it in a way they don't like," Hermione snapped, trying to tug her wrist away. Nott didn't let go. "You don't know my motivations, no more than I know yours. So let's both agree to leave the other alone."

Nott tightened his hand on her wrist. Disappointment and jealousy crossed his dark, unhappy gaze.

He stared at her for a long moment, then dragged her closer to him. Their bodies touched. Hermione would have been afraid were it not for the unspoken fact of Malfoy's protection hanging between them. Nott was obviously aware of it too. His overture was tentative, more of a challenge than a true claim; he searched her face for her reaction, as though hoping she would reciprocate.

He was tall and lean, and the contact between them was not entirely unpleasant. But Hermione was interested to learn that she had become very accustomed to the terrain of Malfoy's body in the last few days. By comparison, Nott's felt foreign and undesirable.

She pushed him back. Nott stepped away without protest, resentment written plainly on his face.

"I like your bell," he said quietly. "Does it jingle? When Draco plays with you?"

Hermione's mouth tightened.

"I'll leave it to your imagination," she said.

She shouldered past him and walked away. Nott's stare followed her down the long hall until she rounded the corner. She exhaled, trying to shake off the encounter.

When she returned to the living room, it was in time to catch only the very end of Malfoy and Dolohov's conversation.

"...soldiers might be a little more motivated to work harder," Dolohov said, rising from the sofa. "If they knew *why* the Commander wants the wand."

Malfoy snorted.

"Soldiers who need motivation to work hard aren't very useful soldiers, are they?"

Hermione curled on the sofa next to Malfoy, her stomach still twisting with agitation. But Malfoy rested his hand on her head and she relaxed, then lay her head in his lap. He looked down at her with a smile, using one finger to stroke the shell of her ear. She nuzzled a little closer.

"A general *and* a philosopher," Dolohov said, already stepping into the Floo. The security wards buzzed and vibrated, aware of a breach. Malfoy's magic was powerful, and Hermione found vicious satisfaction in the fact. "You would have been at home in Ancient Rome, Draco."

"I don't know..." Malfoy said, tracing Hermione's jaw. "I find I prefer the battles to the politics."

"One is *sine qua non* of the other, I'm afraid," Dolohov said wearily.

He gave Malfoy a salute, then disappeared.

The fire flickered into darkness, and Malfoy and Hermione were alone again.

She stretched out on the couch, her toes pointing as she extended her legs across the velvety fabric. Malfoy smoothed his palm over her forehead and she let her eyes drift closed.

"Pretty little thing," he whispered reverently. "All this talk of Roman emperors. Makes me want to feed you grapes."

# Chapter 18

## Chapter Notes



CW at the end.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

A year had felt like a very long time when Hermione first struck their deal.

She had imagined counting the days, had imagined waking up each day already dreading the night. In these imaginings, Malfoy was a hard shadow of a man. All edge, all appetite—nothing to offer her but his hunger.

In none of her imaginings had anything like this ever happened. Hermione was lying face up on Malfoy's lap, trying not to giggle as he balanced a grape on her nose. They were trying to figure out the logistics of how feeding someone fruit was meant to work.

"The issue," he said. "Is that it obviously takes you some time to chew. So—is the desired outcome that I wait with a grape hovering over your mouth? Or...?"

"I think maybe it's more of a leisurely sort of thing," Hermione said. "Like—I ask for a grape and you give it? Rather than a constant stream of grapes..."

She opened her mouth for a grape, showing him her tongue.

Malfoy smiled. He tossed the grape in his mouth and chewed it, eyes sparkling at the sight of her annoyance. He leaned down and kissed her, and Hermione tasted the sweetness of the grape on his lips.

Malfoy leaned back and checked his wristwatch. Hermione bristled at the loss of his attention.

"I'm tired," she said, pulling his arm down so he'd stop looking at his watch. "Can we go to bed?"

Malfoy laughed. He pressed his thumb to her lips, and Hermione puckered her lips to kiss the pad of his thumb. He smiled, delighted.

"I might be busier tomorrow," he said quietly. "I'll have to help Dolohov with the search."

This was not what Hermione wanted to hear. She fought back a little flare of irritation. Twined with the feeling was an edge of worry. Malfoy would have to leave the house again?

For how long?

"I'll spend time with you tonight," he promised. "No, don't pout, sweetheart..."

She tried to dodge his kiss but he tightened his hold on her, holding her still so he could bite gently at the skin under her ears, until Hermione was limp and shivery lying on his lap. She quivered and the little bell on her collar made a small, tremulous noise. She remembered what Nott had said and she reached automatically for the bell, trying to hold it still so it wouldn't tinkle.

"No," Malfoy said lazily, brushing her hand to the side before her fingers reached her throat. "Leave it."

Malfoy moved his face to her neck and she felt him lick her throat, then the bell.

"What will I do with you?" he asked into her skin. She felt his hand slide down her body, then slide between her legs. She was wet. "Hm? Looks like you need attention."

"Malfoy," she said. She squirmed. "Not out here. Please—let's go to the room."

"And what do you want to do in the room?"

Hermione looked up at him, feeling soft and powerless in his lap.

"Please?" was all she managed to say.

She felt his cock harden under her shoulder.

In his room, Malfoy undressed Hermione slowly on his bed. She was only wearing his big shirt and a pair of his socks, but he took his time stripping her. When she was in only her underwear he pushed her back onto the bed, then dragged one of her legs up to rest on his shoulder. He kissed her bare, sensitive ankle, then propped her other leg up and did the same. Nobody had ever kissed her ankle before; the sensation was foreign and twisty and Hermione was breathless with it. The teasing was unbearable, he was going deliberately slow, knowing where she needed the contact was much higher than her ankle. She tried to drag his hand to her cunt. Malfoy laughed softly.

He twisted his hand firmly, breaking her hold, then pinned her fingers to her side.

"No," he said. "Be patient."

The few, thin scars on his cheek and jaw were more visible than normal, with his face close to hers and his cheeks faintly flushed. He lived a life of combat and pain. She liked the thought that he would take his pleasure with her.

Malfoy returned to kissing her ankles. Hermione lasted only a few moments before reaching hopefully for his hand again.

Malfoy pinned both her hands over her head before Hermione could react. His hold was vice-like.

"Do I have to keep you still?" he hummed.

Malfoy summoned something from the bathroom. One of her hair ribbons. He calmly looped the satin around her wrists and secured it with a tight knot, then let go of her. Her hands remained bound together.

He sat back to examine her, and to her despair he seemed happy to keep her teased and waiting. He wasn't even kissing her ankle now. He loomed large and powerful over her, his cock visibly tenting his trousers. The mattress was dipped slightly under their shared weight. She felt like gravity and physics and prophecy were holding her in place there, captured under him.

Malfoy slid his knee between her legs, using it to open her thighs.

"Wider, sweetheart," he said. "There you go. Stay open like that for me. Don't move."

He kissed her breasts, then her stomach, then her hip, laughing quietly when her shuddering grew intense. He kissed the thin lacy band of her underwear, then kissed it again, and Hermione had to let out a quiet sob of frustration. She was certain her underwear was soaked.

Malfoy seemed to have the same thought. He curled his grip under the lacy band of her underwear and tugged it sharply to the side. The material was thin and her underwear tore easily. The jolt of sensation and then the abrupt kiss of cold air on her cunt made her thrust up weakly.

She was so wet. So wet that she could feel the thick slickness between her thighs, the way it felt all cold and sticky at the change in temperature.

Malfoy stared. He exhaled, then dragged his hand over her cunt, using two fingers to part her lips. Holding her open, letting him see it all.

"Pretty little cunt," he whispered quietly. "Look how *wet* you are."

The word "*wet*" was hard with satisfaction. Hermione's cheeks flushed hot with embarrassment at his unapologetic stare. At the gloating undertone to his voice. *Look what I did to your body.*

But then, while his one hand held her lips apart, Malfoy used his other to press on her clit. And Hermione had no more room in her head for embarrassment.

She moaned frantically at the feeling. He teased at her clit expertly, sliding two fingers firmly up and down, then trailing a circle around it. Firm touches, indulgent, and Hermione was unprepared for the onslaught of pleasure. She choked back a wail when he pinched it between his knuckles.

Hermione's wrists hurt and she realized she was writhing, causing the ribbon to dig into her skin.

"Easy," Malfoy cooed, a dark edge of commanding amusement in his voice. He dragged his thumb firmly up and down over her slick clit. "Easy, sweetheart."

"Please," she sobbed. "Please. Faster."

But Malfoy just circled the tip of his finger at her entrance. Not pushing in. Just petting her opening.

"You're swollen," he whispered. "Sensitive?"

Hermione tried to thrust, tried to get his finger back to her clit. Malfoy slid it firmly into her instead. Hermione clenched convulsively around the intrusion, and her eyes rolled back.

Malfoy's finger was big. And the last time she'd had sex was so long ago. He forced apart her walls with slow, efficient pressure, keeping his eyes fixed unblinkingly on her face the whole while. Greedily consuming the sight of each flickering, involuntary expression of pleasure crossing her face. He slowly curled his finger up against her front wall.

"Fuck," he hissed, when Hermione let out a shaky scream.

It was like he was pushing against her clit from the inside. Hermione reversed her attempted thrusting, shoving her hips backwards into the bed instead, wanting to get more pressure against that spongy, sensitive spot.

"Good girl," he whispered.

"Yes," she gasped. He curled his finger and pressed up again and again. "Yes! Yes—"

Hermione wailed. A squirt of fluid came out from her, soaking his hand. Malfoy bared his teeth.

"I want to fuck you," he said softly.

"Yes," she managed to say. "Okay—yes—"

He smiled.

"I want to fuck you," he repeated. "But I want to finish inside you when I do."

Hermione jerked away automatically, alarm shooting through her. She tried to get up.

"No—"

"Shh," he whispered soothingly into her ear. He caressed her stomach. "I won't force you if you don't want it. Don't be scared."

"You can't get me pregnant," Hermione said. "Please—promise—"

"Alright, sweetheart. I promise. Let's play like this instead, hm?"

Malfoy reached up for her bound wrists, over her head, which Hermione had all but forgotten about. They were sore with how hard she'd flailed against the constraints.

Malfoy rested her hands over her stomach, then brought his hips forward so the front of his trousers pressed against her tied wrists. His cock was so hard.

“We can pretend,” he said quietly.

He found her bound hands arousing. The knowledge elicited an instant response in Hermione, and she tried clumsily to touch him with her tied hands. She whined and futilely rubbed the back of her wrists up and down the outline of his shaft, the closest approximation to grasping him available to her.

Malfoy laughed breathlessly, crooning down at the sight of her frantic, pathetic touch.

“There you go,” he breathed. “Less scared now? You want to touch?”

His cock jerked upwards, straining against his trousers. Hermione wanted to pull his trousers down, wanted to make him feel some of the agonized, frustrated pleasure she did. Maybe if she turned him on more he would touch her cunt and let her orgasm. But her hands were too clumsy, bound by ribbon as they were. Malfoy let her struggle a little longer, then unzipped his trousers and tugged down the band of his black boxer briefs as well.

Hermione was unprepared for how it would feel to see his cock. It was shockingly lewd to see his erection now, after these weeks of careful non-sex between them. He was so hard and symmetric and slightly curved—swollen with arousal, ready to drive into her.

Malfoy thrust lazily forward against her hands instead, fucking the air around her fingers. Making Hermione crazy with the vision of him doing the same between her legs instead.

“Good job,” he said, dragging the tip of his cock against her knuckles. “You’re making me so happy, darling. Being so well-behaved.”

He brought one of his hands to his mouth and spat against his fingers, then coated himself with the wetness. He held her hands tightly together then slowly slid his cock between her palms, groaning harshly at the tightness.

“We can pretend I’m going inside you,” he said, holding her hands steady. His voice shook softly. “I would push you open. Just like this.”

Hermione needed him to touch her. One of his hands was around her bound wrists, the other was on the bed, bracing his weight—the absence of friction between her legs felt unbearable. Especially as she watched pleasure cloud over Malfoy’s features. As his handsome, usually inscrutable features were wrecked with sensation. A strand of white blond hair fell forward over his eyes. In what other situation would he be so unalert? So distracted, his vision imperfect? Hermione’s stomach tightened at this thought—that Malfoy, the hardened Death Eater, had no room in his usually sharp mind for anything other than needing to fuck her.

He drove his cock between her hands again. Hermione whimpered at the sight of his long cock sliding slowly in and out of her bound palms.

“Malfoy,” she begged. “I need you to touch me. Please, just a little...”

"No," he cooed softly. His cock slid steadily in and out of her hands, and Hermione shuddered when his hips snapped faster and faster. "You just lie there and wait, sweetheart."

All she could do was be there and watch him, like some sort of voyeuristic torture.

He thrust into her hands until his breaths went from uneven to hard and rough. He thrust harder and less steadily. She could tell he was near orgasm.

"I'd fuck you fast, just like this," he said. "And I'd hold your hips tight, and when I came I'd push deep into you. And I'd get it all inside, and I'd fuck it deeper into you after—"

Hermione wished it was possible for her to come without any stimulation. She was suddenly wracked with fear that he would orgasm and then leave her tortured like this, that he wouldn't let her come at all once he was done.

"Malfoy," Hermione pleaded, her tongue thick and clumsy. She tried to pull her hands back but they caught around his shaft. "Please, please, wait—touch me first, please—I need it—"

"No," he answered, his breaths heavy, and the firm rejection made Hermione's cunt clench intolerably.

Denying her seemed to push him over the edge.

He grunted, then pulled back, his cock sliding out from between her palms. He grabbed his shaft and stroked himself fast and uneven.

"Look up at me," he hissed. "Yes, look at me—"

She met his eyes and as she did he finished all over her tied wrists, over the ribbon binding them, spurting over skin and silk.

Hermione's involuntary whimpering noises cut abruptly off into a sort of pathetic, shocked silence—she stared helplessly at his cock twitching, at the orgasm he'd so lovingly described as going into her. Her cunt was empty now instead. The pressure in her lower stomach was painful; her clit felt swollen and sensitive, aching and aching in response to every spurt of cum Malfoy dragged out of himself.

She keened silently as Malfoy finished. Her wrists were sticky with him, the ribbon ruined. Malfoy shuddered and let the last of his ejaculation fall onto her stomach, pooling between her hips.

"It's okay, sweetheart," Malfoy whispered breathlessly, still pulling slowly at his cock. "No, no, pet, don't cry. I'll take care of you right now."

He let go of himself. His hand was large and had his spend on it; he dragged his fingers through the mess on her stomach and then smeared it down to her cunt. The cum left sticky white streaks shining against her golden skin. Malfoy rubbed it into her clit, working it into the skin around her most sensitive spot.

*Yes. Yes. Yes.*

“You did such a good fucking job,” he cooed. “Didn’t you? Didn’t my girl work so hard—“

Hermione’s vision blacked out. His motions were firm and fast—no teasing, no toying—after all this teasing and frustration, the touch was like a searing fire coiling around and around her swollen cunt, right where she needed it—tight and hard—oh *God*, oh God, yes, please, she was about to explode—

Her orgasm tore through her. Hermione screamed out and thrust against Malfoy’s hand, shaking, fighting for air. The sensation rocked through her with obliterating intensity and she wailed when he circled her clit with deliberate slowness in response.

“Yes,” she sobbed, flooded with gratitude. “Yes, yes—thank you—”

“You’re welcome, baby,” Malfoy said as Hermione thrust up against his palm. He ground his hand firmly against her, pressing his spend against her clit, dragging wave after wave of pleasure out of her cunt. “All over my hand, sweetheart. Let’s make a mess.”

She felt like nothing but raw nerve endings and thrumming orgasm and hot, sticky pleasure between her thighs.

Malfoy rubbed her clit until Hermione was slumped into a shivering puddle. Then he crawled atop her and kissed her. His hand was still covered in come and he dragged it up her hips, pressing it against her stomach.

“It would have been all in here,” he whispered lazily into her ear, and she could imagine the hard curve of his smile as he spoke. “Maybe next time, hm?”

Hermione barely heard him, she was still shaking so badly. She curled tight under him and he held her firmly against his chest.

The afterglow was intoxicating, too heavy to fight off. Malfoy was warm and large and strong all around her. She fell asleep almost instantly, with him whispering possessive little love notes in her ear.

## Chapter End Notes

There was supposed to be plot in this chapter but oh well! Chapter count goes up instead :)

CW: breeding kink talk. Dub con is at a high level at certain points.

## Chapter 19

Hermione was dreaming about the war.

In her dream, she was situated at the very top of a tall, spiring tower. Outside her window were large, fluffy clouds. From all the way up here, Hermione couldn't see any evidence of the war. But she could hear it. Distant yelling and explosions.

There was no door in the tall stone room. But Hermione had the sneaking suspicion that she hadn't looked quite as hard as she ought to have.

Towards the end of the dream, Malfoy arrived in the form of a large, black-scaled dragon. He climbed up the tall tower and joined her in the room, trying to coil his cold body protectively around her. Hermione knew it was him because of the eyes. Huge and silver, bright with intelligence and flat as metal coins. They followed her with alert affection, with something greedy and adoring in their reptilian depths.

The dragon licked Hermione's cheek when she let it get close. And then she woke up.

She was in bed, curled in warm, soft blankets, and Malfoy was touching her cheek. Softly, with just his fingertips. He stood over her, watching her wake, already fully dressed. The outline of him was dark and crisp against the pale, early morning bright of the window.

"Good morning." He dragged his thumb lightly along her cheek. "I'm getting ready to leave."

Hermione blinked away the sleep; she sat up.

"Leave?" she asked, looking up at him. "Where?"

"Latvia. But I'll be back tonight."

Malfoy looked like he'd been up for hours. He was in thick black robes with the faintly scarred armored guard plates—the uniform that he'd had on the first night he'd stolen her, and the night he'd returned from saving Tonks. Hermione recognized it now as his war attire. His blond hair had been a soft, rumpled sweep against Hermione's cheek when he held her close to his chest last night. But now it was sharply brushed to the side—still a little damp from a shower.

He was holding his Death Eater mask at his side. Not wearing it yet—she knew he didn't want to wear it in front of her.

"Can't you go later?" she asked nervously, hoping to convince him to stay. "You haven't even dressed me."

Malfoy smiled. He stooped to kiss her and lingered like that—his head close to hers, one of his hands bracing his weight on the soft, warm bed. Hermione thought—wished—that he would crawl back in bed next to her.

"I left a dress for you in the closet," he said quietly, his breath a light tickle against her cheek. "So that you can get dressed after sleeping in. Or you can stay in pajamas today, until I get back."

Hermione was abruptly, unexpectedly, overcome with frustration. She felt powerless to stop him from leaving her, and angry that he wasn't indulging her.

"Don't go," she demanded.

Malfoy looked amused at her indignation. He tapped her chin with his thumb.

"I make the rules," he said softly, straightening up.

"What if something happens to me while you're gone?" she tried.

"There's nowhere safer than here. I made sure of it. And if something does happen, you know what to do. Hold my ring. I'll come back immediately and take care of you."

"You wouldn't get back in time," Hermione said pettily. "If something really were to happen. Latvia is too far to Apparate in one go. By the time you get back, who knows what—"

Malfoy held out his hand.

The ring at Hermione's throat hummed instantly, responding to his magic. Even the bell on her necklace quivered, emitting a shivering metallic noise where it touched the ring.

"I'm connected to it," Malfoy said, holding up a hand.

Golden threads of magic flickered palely into view. He showed her how they wound around his fingers, his palm—even up his shirt and presumably into his chest. He closed his fingers, pulling the golden threads taut, and the thin silver chain of her necklace drew tight around her neck. She felt his signet ring vibrate, the epicenter of the magic.

Malfoy relaxed his hand and the chain slackened. He let his hand drop at his side and the golden strings faded once more out of view.

"That ring is full of my family's magic," he said. "Your necklace and little bell are part of it too now, just from touching it. You have nothing to worry about. I can Apparate to you from Latvia. I could Apparate to you from the fourth ring of hell."

Hermione refused to seem impressed or even interested.

Malfoy looked at her with amusement, a little fond smirk on his face. He absently tapped the Death Eater mask at his side with one long finger, as though thinking. Hermione had the feeling he might actually stay, if she asked him a little nicer.

But before she could, Malfoy seemed to overcome the impulse.

"Don't pout, sweetheart," he said, smoothing her curls out of her face. "It hurts my heart. Be a good girl and wait for me, now. I'll bring you a present when I come back."

"What kind of present?"

Malfoy laughed.

"Something you'll like," he promised.

Hermione didn't say anything. Malfoy leaned down to kiss her goodbye, but Hermione turned her head away

"Hey," Malfoy chastised, grasping her jaw. He turned her to face him. "You can tell me you don't want a kiss. But you know better than to jerk away."

Hermione glared up into his eyes and silently willed him to stay.

Malfoy kissed her nose

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I'll be back soon."

He straightened up and cast a handful of powder into the Floo. The flames turned green and Malfoy stepped into them, sliding the mask over his face as the fire carried him away.

~

In a half-hearted attempt at rebellion, Hermione refused to eat her breakfast. The servants had left her a tray of toast and blackberry preserves and a poached egg on the coffee table in Malfoy's office, perhaps assuming she'd want to read there in his absence. But Hermione ignored it. She relished in the grumbling sound her stomach made, knowing it would upset Malfoy to learn she hadn't eaten.

Hermione walked around his huge, empty office for a while, staring glumly at the books on Malfoy's shelves. Then she returned to their bedroom and languished there for an hour or so. She lay atop the perfectly made sheets (she wasn't sure when the servants or elves managed to get in and out, but the bed was always made) and closed her eyes.

There was a lingering muscle memory, sometimes, that made her want to jump to her feet in a panic and make progress on the never-ending list of things she'd had to do at the Order.

But she was getting better at quelling it. She was getting better at lying here, and accepting the stillness of the world around her. The silence of this big house, of the pretty eggshell-toned wallpaper and the dark beams in the high ceiling.

Had the world always been this quiet? It felt like a different universe from the one she was used to with the Order, where it was all noise and requests and busy, frantic energy.

Hermione's resolve to not eat breakfast dwindled by noon, when her hunger became harder to ignore. She finally clambered out of bed in search of her breakfast, but it seemed the servants had cleaned it up. Her little tray was nowhere to be found. Chagrined, Hermione left the room with a plan to go to the kitchens to find something else to eat. But she paused on the

way there, at the wall of wide, sparkling windows in the living room. Like all the windows in this house, they were clear and tremendous. Floor to ceiling, all glass and no pane. So different from the decorative criss-crosses, the brass embellishments, of the windows that Hermione remembered from Malfoy Manor. As though Malfoy had learned the hard way that being able to see what was coming was crucial.

It was cold and white outside. Winter had arrived in earnest.

And there was a thin figure out by the skeletal hedges. A thin figure in a large black coat.

Hermione's heart seemed to stop. Years of trained trauma rose to the surface. There was a stranger in the safe house, there was a Death Eater who had made his way in, they were all in danger—

But the figure lifted a cigarette to its mouth, tilting their face up to reveal dark eyebrows and red lipstick, and Hermione steadied herself on the window frame.

Not an intruder. Just Pansy Parkinson.

She was wearing a fur coat over what looked like pajamas.

Hermione reeled with relief. She willed her heart to slow down. Just Pansy. It was just Pansy. Her dark hair was loose, uncharacteristically messy where it hung over the fur collar. She looked hungover or perhaps drunk; she was staring off into the distance.

Hermione decided, after a moment's hesitation, to go talk to her. She had already spoken to Nott, after all, and who knew what additional information or context Pansy would provide? The only woman in this house, other than Hermione. Their perspectives surely should—if not align exactly—resonate in some fashion. The way Hermione had found again and again the unexpected ways that women understood each other, in wartime.

It was freezing outside, and Hermione shivered as she stepped from the warm, comfortable halls of Malfoy's home out into the wintry grounds. The dress that Malfoy had laid out for her that morning was long-sleeved, but insufficient against the biting cold air. Hermione wished she had a coat as thick and warm as Pansy's seemed to be.

Pansy watched with vague interest as Hermione approached. She took another drag from her cigarette and was even polite enough to turn her face away when she blew out the blue-white smoke, which was thick and velvety in the chilly air.

"Hello," Pansy said dully. "What do you want?"

Her eyes were red from crying.

"Are you—alright?" Hermione asked uncertainly. She shivered and held her arms tighter.

Pansy snorted and tapped the filter of her cigarette with one red-polished nail, helping the excess ash fall to the ground.

"Just peachy," she said. "What about you, Granger? Are you enjoying your stay?"

The tone was condescending at surface, but lacked any real bite. Hermione considered how to respond.

"It's sort of nice to pretend the war isn't happening," she finally admitted.

Pansy laughed, a little warmer now.

"Pretending is critical," Pansy agreed. "It's important to avoid thinking about the hard things."

Hermione once again had the sense she was a bit drunk, though the woman retained a sense of elegance that would have ruled out inebriation in most others. But there was just a sort of—fuzzy sense of vulnerability about her. Hermione recognized the demeanor of someone who was trying to drown out misery.

What was eating away at Pansy?

But before Hermione could figure out a way to ask, Pansy reached into her coat and drew a wand. The motion was surprisingly quick—seeing as Pansy was drunk—and Hermione flinched out of automatic, involuntary alarm.

"Oh, please," Pansy snapped irritably. "I'm not going to attack you."

She lifted her wand with exaggerated slowness and re-lit her cigarette, which had gone out.

"Sorry," Hermione said. Her cheeks were warm with embarrassment. "I think I've become—more skittish without my wand."

"A wand can't keep you safe anyway," Pansy said, inhaling from her cigarette once more. She stared out into the woods. "Plenty of people die clutching their wands."

Hermione didn't know what to say to this.

She stood silently for a while, until Pansy cleared her throat. Her black eyes were bright. She seemed to be trying to decide whether or not to say something.

Then, not quite meeting Hermione's eyes, Pansy said:

"You should know—that I didn't mean to miss the funeral."

The statement was unexpected, as was the suddenly shaky tone with which Pansy delivered it.

For a moment, Hermione didn't even know what funeral Pansy was talking about. There had been so many. She was silent for a moment, trying to remember, and Pansy seemed to take the lack of response as an attack.

"I mean it," Pansy snapped defensively. "I know you lot won't believe it. But I was trying to go. I was trying. My parents caught me trying to leave the house. They never liked him—just like you lot never liked me—"

*Oh.*

That funeral.

Hermione tried not to let her shock show. She had, in fact, resented Pansy for not showing up. Though the resentment, and even the memory of the funeral, had long since faded into irrelevance as newer and fresher tragedies accumulated.

Pansy wiped her eyes angrily.

“I didn’t mean to miss the funeral,” she said again, and this time her voice was harder and more forceful. And yet, somehow, more pained. Thick with scar tissue. Like Pansy had said the words to herself over and over again.

“It’s okay,” Hermione said uncomfortably. “I’m sure he—would have understood—”

It was bizarre to be reminded of a tragedy from so long ago. Bizarre to learn that—almost five years after the fact, and engaged to another man—Pansy was evidently still haunted by what her dead boyfriend’s friends thought of her.

Friends that, true to Pansy’s suspicion, had never liked her. Who had been angry but unsurprised when she didn’t show up at the service.

“I just wanted someone to know,” Pansy said. “So if you ever get out of here, be sure to tell your Gryffindor friends. Okay? That Pansy meant to go.”

Hermione had grown used to the mashup of emotions that reared their Hydra-like heads in the face of grief. She felt them all now, as she met Pansy’s miserable, defiant gaze. It was odd how, as the war went on, every emotion just started to feel mostly like sadness.

“Okay,” Hermione said quietly. “I will.”

~

Hermione lost much of her appetite after the conversation with Pansy. She walked back to Malfoy’s room, not hungry any longer.

She had long harbored the sense that the world was fundamentally wrong in some way. Broken. It was a surreal feeling, a sort of dissociated detachment that whispered to Hermione that clearly, *clearly*, this all had to be a nightmare. Clearly, things had happened incorrectly—the path of history had at some point veered violently off the course it was intended to have gone on, and now Hermione was glimpsing some alternate reality hellscape.

She had assumed that this was just a natural reaction for those on the losing side of any war. The cognitive dissonance of sacrificing everything for the greater good, then learning that it had been for nothing. So Hermione was unsettled to learn that the feeling had not, apparently, entirely spared the victors either. In Pansy’s haunted expression Hermione had recognized the dazed, disbelieving pain of her own soul.

Hermione sat back on Malfoy's bed, facing the window. She watched the small, cold sun arc across the winter sky, going from high and white to bloody red, before it sank unfeelingly below the treetops.

The lamps in Malfoy's room came on automatically once it got dark. Hermione had the feeling that he'd charmed them to do that, just for her. Even her little candle flickered to life.

Malfoy had left one of his silver watches out on the side table for her, magicked to be floating upright like a tiny grandfather clock. It was now just past five o'clock. Hermione watched the thin, spider-leg like second hand twitch ever closer to the twelve. Then it would start again, beginning the weary journey of another minute.

The watch had the date visible on the bottom edge of its face. A little box for numbers; today was December fifth. How long had she been here with Malfoy already? Something like—two weeks? Maybe three? So he would have her until next November. The beginning of November. And that's when Hermione would be returned to the world.

Hermione found she didn't want to think about that.

Six o' clock came and went. Then seven.

Malfoy had promised to be back for dinner.

Eight o'clock, nine o' clock, ten o' clock.

Hermione chose a book at random and tried to read it, hoping to distract herself from increasingly vivid imaginings of Malfoy dying.

She must have fallen asleep. Because the next thing she knew, Malfoy was tugging a book out of her loose grip. She'd fallen asleep by the fireplace, waiting for him to come back.

Malfoy smelled like the outdoors. Rain and dirt and sweat. A tinge of coppery blood.

"Asleep on the rug?" Malfoy asked quietly. "Not good for your back, darling."

Hermione wrapped her arms around his leg and he laughed softly.

"Missed me?" he asked, palming her head.

Malfoy lowered himself wearily to the rug next to her, then tugged her close. He was still in all his gear.

"I know I'm late," he said quietly, pressing his lips to her temple. "I'm sorry."

Hermione leaned into his kiss. She turned to him, then froze at the sight of a new cut on his face. Parallel to the side of his cheek, red and dark going from his temple down almost to his mouth. Blood had dried on his skin.

"What happened?" she asked, reaching for it.

Malfoy caught her hand before she could touch the scar.

"Slow to dodge a hex," he said. "I'll put a bandage on in a second. Don't get your hands dirty."

Hermione wanted to examine his cut. But he lowered her hand firmly to her lap, and she laced her fingers together to keep herself from reaching for his face again.

"Did someone attack you?" she asked, her fingernails biting into her own palm.

"Yes. People were expecting us," Malfoy sighed, lying back on the rug and stretching out his long legs. "Unfortunately."

Malfoy didn't seem concerned about the attack—presumably, this was not an unusual occurrence. But Hermione could not be so blasé.

"You promised me everything would be fine," she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

Malfoy looked at her. He took her hand.

"And it was. There's none of them left," he said. "Don't be afraid."

Malfoy kissed her knuckles, then toyed with her fingers. He ran his thumb over her nails, which were neat and trimmed from her bath the previous day.

"I have your present," he coaxed, meeting her eyes with a smile.

Hermione couldn't hide her suddenly straightened posture, her alert excitement. It had been a long time since anyone had given her a gift.

"What is it?" she asked, peering around him.

"I can't tell you," he said in a tone of mock offense. He summoned a box from by the fireplace. "You have to open it to see."

The box was wrapped in red paper, and had a small, curly gold ribbon affixed to the top.

Hermione took the whole thing from him, breathless with excitement. Her fingers shook as she ripped apart the wrapping paper.

There were holes poked in the top of the box, through the wrapping paper.

Surely he hadn't—

Something small and fluffy and fast sprang instantly out and onto Hermione's face.

"Oh," Hermione gasped in ecstasy, peeling tiny claws off her shoulder. It was a kitten. "Oh my god, oh my god—"

Malfoy laughed, clearly pleased with Hermione's reaction.

The kitten was black, its fur so dark it looked almost blue. It swatted at Hermione's hair then wiggled easily out of her hands when she tried to pull it away. It leapt onto her shoulder like a sentient ink blot and instantly tangled itself in her curls.

Hermione giggled and tugged it free of her hair, then held the kitten up to the light, staring rapturously at it.

*A friend.*

Malfoy smiled and reached forward to run a knuckle down the kitten's bony spine. It arched happily into his touch.

"You like him?" Malfoy asked.

"I love him," Hermione managed to say.

Malfoy kissed her shoulder.

"I'm sorry for leaving you alone, darling," he whispered. "Now you have someone to keep you company, when I can't."

Hermione was vaguely concerned by the implication that she might need company again in the near future, when Malfoy had to go search for the wand once more. But she was too awestruck by the kitten to care just now.

It had wide yellow eyes that lit on Hermione like twin full moons. It opened its mouth to yawn in a flash of pink tongue and white fangs.

The kitten had a white leather collar on its thin neck, and Hermione searched for a name tag. It was difficult to get ahold of it, as the kitten kept wriggling. But when Hermione plucked up the small gold tag, she found the metal was smooth and unblemished.

"You pick the name," Malfoy said, unbuckling his arm guards.

Hermione admired the tiny black kitten.

"Crow," she finally said.

Malfoy laughed.

"Cute," he said. "Crow-kshanks?"

Hermione was surprised and delighted that Malfoy knew the name of her old ginger cat. (Crookshanks was now wandering feral somewhere in the Forbidden Forest, probably fatter and happier than he'd ever been, though Hermione missed him terribly. There had been no room for pets in the safe house.)

"No," she laughed. "We can't give him a name like that to live up to. Crow needs to make his own way, don't you darling?"

Malfoy kissed her cheek with a smile, looking relaxed and at ease. He seemed happy to be back home with Hermione.

He ran his thumb over the gold tag of the kitten's collar and the name appeared, etched neatly in four evenly-spaced letters.

Crow.

"I love you, Crow," Hermione cooed, holding the kitten up to her face.

Malfoy made a little affectionate noise.

"So sweet, princess," he said, combing his fingers gently through her curls. "Are you happy with me now? Am I forgiven?"

Hermione nodded, laughing with delight when the kitten batted at her cheeks.

Malfoy reclined on one arm and watched her play with Crow. The kitten occasionally tried to hunt Malfoy's hand, swinging its whip-thin tail back and forth before lunging at his long fingers.

Malfoy snorted with amusement—presumably at Crow's imperfect killing form—and wiggled his hand, sending Crow into a frenzy and making Hermione laugh.

It was very late, and neither Hermione nor Crow were immune to the inexorable drowsiness of late night, even with the giddy excitement of a new friend. By the time Hermione had grown tired enough to fall asleep, Crow had as well. They curled next to Malfoy on the rug, tucked into one another.

He drew them both into his arms, and Hermione felt herself relax at the comforting feeling of his hard chest against her back. Rising and falling calmly, steadily.

Hermione buried her nose in Crow's black fur and wished with every fiber of her being that Malfoy would stay home with her always, instead of going out into the world.

She breathed the wish into the top of Crow's silky head, and the kitten purred.

## Chapter 20

Malfoy woke before Hermione the next morning. He needed to dress some of his injuries.

There was the long gash on his face, which he dabbed some Dittany on but opted to leave unbandaged now that a night had passed and it was already dry. He had also broken a rib.

He stood before the bathroom mirror and lifted his shirt. Dark purple and mottled yellow. Malfoy grimaced with distaste and felt gingerly along the bone.

He found the break. He pressed firmly—a little pulse of magic, a painful crack—the bone reset.

He exhaled sharply and let his shirt drop back down.

Latvia had been a mess. The Death Eaters had been outnumbered. The tip about the wand, it was clear, had been falsely planted—and now Malfoy was left with broken ribs and the blood of seven dead Order members on his hands. They were Order members he hadn't recognized. Mercenaries, from the look of it—though how the Order was finding or funding these new recruits Malfoy could only guess.

He didn't feel bad for killing them, not even in light of his promise to keep the Order safe. They had struck first in this instance, after all. He'd done his best.

Malfoy rubbed some ointment onto the minor cuts on his forearm. The door to the bathroom inched open; Crow pushed his way into the room.

The tiny black kitten watched Malfoy curiously. Malfoy looked back in the mirror's reflection, amused.

"I'm not doing anything fun in here," Malfoy said. "You should go stay in bed with Hermione."

But Crow just yawned, then leapt deftly onto the marble counter and sat.

"Your choice," Malfoy hummed, returning to examining his injuries. He tore a piece of bandage off with his teeth before applying it to his chest. "The trick is to do the most painful part first. Ribs done now, see? All these little cuts and scrapes feel like puppy kisses in comparison."

Not exactly puppy kisses, maybe. Malfoy used his wand and dragged out a small, twisted piece of metal debris that had lodged itself in his arm. Crow gave an alarmed yowl as Malfoy tossed the bit of shrapnel into the sink.

"Shh," Malfoy whispered. "Don't wake your mummy."

He stopped the blood with the bandage.

Injuries like this were a common affair for Malfoy. He figured that at some point in the near future, Hermione would feel safe and comfortable enough to not be so alarmed by the sight of his wounds. But until then, he didn't want to scare her.

Malfoy made sure the bandage stuck, then rolled his shirt down. Crow yowled again when Malfoy ran the tap to wash his hands.

"I thought cats were meant to be quiet. Hush."

But Crow just meowed pettily in response.

Malfoy had grown up around big red hunting hounds. He preferred dogs.

Outside the bathroom, he heard Hermione shift around in bed. Crow meowed again, eagerly hopping off the counter and trotting out the bathroom door and into the bedroom.

"Oh, *good morning*," Hermione cooed sleepily. "I thought I dreamt you..."

Malfoy smiled to himself as he put the medical supplies away.

"Malfoy?" Hermione called.

"In the bathroom," he said. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes," she said with a happy yawn. "Oh—you have to come see this, Crow is rolling around and showing his little belly..."

Malfoy emerged to do as she asked.

"Cute," he said politely, though he found the cat's behavior to be quite standard.

Hermione, on the other hand, was a rumpled little angel of a girl this morning. Her cheeks were pink and she rubbed her eyes, wayward curls catching on her hand.

"I think Crow wants to explore the house," Hermione said with another yawn.

Crow was, indeed, standing imperiously by the door now.

"I'll let him out," Malfoy said. "You stay in bed, sweetheart."

"Oh, thank you. I think he's hungry..."

"There's food and water for him in the kitchens. He'll have fun looking around."

Malfoy cracked the door and Crow darted out of the room, disappearing like an oil slick running through a grate.

Malfoy turned back to Hermione.

"What will we do today?" she asked, smiling. She fluffed her pillow and propped it against the headboard, then sank happily back against it. "I was thinking maybe we should set up a

little blanket nest for Crow by a window. So he can watch the birds. Crookshanks used to love that..."

But Malfoy just gave her an apologetic look.

Hermione tensed, then sat up straighter. Like she needed to gather herself for the effort of keeping Malfoy here.

"You don't have to go yet, do you?" she asked, looking up at him. Malfoy twirled his finger in a loving spiral through a lock of her hair.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I need to meet with Dolohov and plan our next search."

Hermione's hand wound its way into his, lacing their fingers tightly together. She squeezed, a little frantic look in her eyes.

"No," she said. "Please stay. Go tomorrow, alright? We can stay here today, and you can play with Crow with me, and you can just—go tomorrow."

Malfoy grimaced.

He didn't want to leave. Especially not when she was looking at him like that.

But he had a feeling that his increased absence on the field was becoming noticeable. And plus, the sooner they found the wand the sooner Malfoy could hole up with Hermione for longer periods of time.

Malfoy smoothed his hand over Hermione's hair. Soft and warm.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

"No," Hermione begged. "Malfoy—please. Isn't this what you wanted? To spend time with me?"

She rose to her knees on the bed, her face barely up to his shoulders, and hugged him.

It was unexpected, and somehow felt more intimate even than a kiss.

An innocent gesture of affection.

Of need.

Her cheek pressed hard to his chest, her thin arms tight around his torso. Like the force of her want could keep him there.

It took Malfoy a moment to react.

The intensity of this sensation—of Hermione clinging to him, her affection raw and pure—was surely enough to break a stronger man's will.

He tipped his head down just enough to press his lips to the crown of her head. He held her head against his chest.

"If I give in this time," he said. "Then you'll think you can make me do this every time. That wouldn't be a very good precedent to set, I think?"

Hermione did not miss the question in his voice. The uncharacteristic uncertainty, the wiggle room.

"No, it would be fine," she whispered, her breath hot and small against the cloth of his shirt. He felt the warmth of it like a glow over his heart. "Here—just lie in bed with me a little, okay? It will be nice. And you'll decide you don't want to go on your own, right? And then it won't be like you gave in. Okay?"

She tugged futilely at his large hand, trying to get him into bed, and Malfoy laughed. If Hermione had read a textbook on wrapping Malfoy around her finger, she couldn't have done a better job.

"Okay," he said quietly. He rubbed his palm in circles over her lower back. "Relax, sweetheart. Let go. I said okay."

Hermione gripped the cuff of his sleeve and tried quickly to drag him into bed, plainly hoping to do so before he could change his mind.

"I like you," Malfoy said quietly. "Darling thing. I think it's sweet that you want me to stay."

He sat next to her, on top of the covers.

She let out a relieved, eager sigh and curled her hands into his shirt. She clung like a koala cub to his chest. Malfoy nipped her ear, trying to get her to relax. She tilted her face away to dodge his teeth and he nipped her jaw, making her giggle.

"I wonder," Malfoy said. "If I let you go right now. Do you think you would just come running right back?"

"I would run from you as fast as I could," Hermione said peevishly. He didn't believe her. "Because you're mean, and brutish, and do things like kidnap me from my home only to leave me *alone* so you can go off into the world and make your stupid plans—"

He laughed.

"My little wife is *so cranky* in the mornings," Malfoy cooed. He rolled on top of her and she squealed, then bit his forearm. "So unhappy with me, aren't you darling? But I have to go out so I can bring home the bacon, don't I?"

"I don't want a *husband* who would rather do work than spend time with me."

Malfoy's heart thrummed at the word husband, as she surely must have known it would. He kissed her.

"Then I won't be that kind of husband," he promised. "You come first. Yes?"

Her small fists—her weak arms—were pinned easily to the bed as he held her down to kiss her. She wriggled but didn't really seem to be making a true effort to break out of his hold. When she finally settled, she lay still and just looked up into his eyes. He gazed back, wondering how this level of intimacy was possible.

He wanted to peer into her brain, into her soul. He wanted to do it for minutes on end.

What was the muggle name for that hormone—oxytocin? Malfoy had always known that he was a very physical person. But being close like this to her, sharing the same air, the same light, the same warmth—it was like a tranquilizing drug. Warming him all the way through.

"I come first," she repeated, preening. "Good."

"That's right sweetheart," Malfoy said. "Do you know what day it is?"

"December sixth," Hermione said, surprising him.

He smiled.

"How did you know that?" he asked curiously. He didn't think there were any calendars around.

"I read it on your watch last night. When I was waiting for you."

"You've been here for exactly one month," Malfoy said, nuzzling her throat. "We have eleven left. And then it will be time to let you go."

Hermione's eyes moved between his.

"Right," she said.

Malfoy's hand clenched subconsciously over her wrist.

"But I've been a very good husband," Malfoy suggested softly. "Haven't I? I'm so good at taking care of you. I worry sometimes that you won't be able to find another man who can take *such good* care of you. You were skin and bones when I found you..."

Malfoy felt—with the aid of some magic—her heart rate escalate.

"So why don't we..." he said, holding her face in one hand. He kissed her nose and slid his fingers down to her neck, then gave her throat a tender squeeze before dropping his hand to lace together with hers. "Consider extending our deal? Your stay?"

Hermione didn't move. But Malfoy squeezed her hand lovingly and she turned her head to the side, resting her mouth against his bicep. Avoiding his gaze.

"Just something to think about," Malfoy hummed, carefully repositioning her so she was looking up at him again. He slid his leg between her thighs and parted them a little. "You're

such a precious little thing. Can I touch you, darling?"

Hermione relaxed her legs, letting them open wider. Malfoy slid his knee up between her, so the hot center of her pressed firmly against his hard thigh muscle. Hermione met his eyes when he grazed her there, and he got to see her lashes flutter when he ground her against him.

"Feels good?"

Hermione nodded silently.

"Tell me," he said, grinding his leg slowly against her again. "With your words."

"It feels good," she breathed. She stared down between them, at his leg pressed between her thighs, and her lips parted open with a little wobble when he ground his leg against her. "*Oh —*"

"I like doing that for you," he said breathlessly, watching the way her soft hips arched up in search of friction from him. Her soft, pale underwear against the dark fabric of his trousers. "Look at you grind. Pretty girl. You got what you wanted from me, hm? You put your little foot down and here I am, staying in bed with you..."

She gazed with drooping, drunk eyelids at the spot between them, where his leg ground insistently against her. The color rose high in Hermione's cheeks, dusting the tops of her shoulders and the front of her chest with pink blush.

Malfoy touched her reddened mouth with his thumb, stroking the pretty almond shape of it.

"What a good girl you are," he hissed, tensing his leg so it applied a firmer pressure to her cunt. "Look at you melt, darling. Into a little *puddle*."

Hermione arched up, pushing against him, her body liquid soft in its search for pleasure.

Malfoy lifted her dress up and eased it over her arms and shoulders, laying it to the side.

"So precious," he breathed wetly against her skin. "Such a sweet girl. Open your mouth, darling."

Hermione let her lips fall apart. Malfoy kissed the corner of her mouth, then dragged his tongue along the plump line of her bottom lip. He bit on her lip and held her firmly in place when she shivered. He squeezed her jaw, holding her mouth open.

"Good girl," he said. He felt like a shark with blood in its nostrils. Going crazy. "Such a good girl. Hold my hand. Put it between your legs."

Hermione didn't hesitate. She shuffled her legs apart and set his heavy palm right over her center. Where, through a thin little film of cotton, her cunt seared heat against his hand.

"Spread wider," he breathed.

She opened her knees out then rested them open like that, her legs splayed like a butterfly. Malfoy pressed his thumb to her clit and Hermione arched back with a quiet inhale.

He rubbed the sensitive spot slowly and insistently until the fabric of her underwear was warm and wet.

Malfoy pulled her underwear to the side and circled the tip of his middle finger at her wet entrance.

"I want to fuck you," he said quietly. He slid his finger in, just a little. "I think it would make you feel very..."

Malfoy pressed slowly up against her inner wall until Hermione gasped.

"Good," he finished.

He kept his middle finger in her and pressed his thumb to her clit, squeezing both fingers tight so a little spurt of fluid trickled out of her.

"You can't get me pregnant," Hermione breathed unsteadily. Her eyes were wide and her cheeks were flushed pink. "*Promise.*"

"Mm," he said, continuing his lazy pressure on her inner wall. "You are the only woman I've been with who hoped I wouldn't get them pregnant."

"I don't care," she said with a note of petulance.

He could tell she didn't like him talking about his previous partners. Malfoy smiled a shark's grin at that. He was a jealous lover when it came to her. It was good to know she was the same.

"I promise," he cooed. "What about a contraceptive potion?"

"I don't trust you to give me a real one," she said crossly. "You sneaky— *ah*—"

Her stomach muscles tightened as Malfoy pressed more insistently on her inner wall. He drew his finger in and out firmer, faster.

Hermione's final word broke off into a little cry of pleasure.

Malfoy watched her come, controlling the pace of her release with firm, steady strokes. Her walls convulsed in an uneven fluttering rhythm around his finger. He wanted badly to be buried in her.

"Poor little thing," he whispered. "There you go. Let it all out."

When she shuddered emptily, Malfoy removed his hand from her, then licked his finger clean. Hermione watched him, her usually bright brown eyes cloudy.

"I'm going to fuck you," he said softly.

She shivered and her mouth parted..

"If you—use a condom."

Condoms were a muggle contraceptive. He wondered if Hermione thought, perhaps, that Malfoy wouldn't have any in the house. She would have underestimated both his forward thinking and his longing for her, if so.

Malfoy summoned one from the bathroom and held the packet in his teeth as he undid his belt. Then he tore the foil open.

"Why don't you put it on for me?" he asked, handing her the packet.

Hermione took the condom from him and, meeting his eyes uncertainly, reached for his waistband.

"Good girl," he breathed.

Hermione undid the button, then tugged at his zipper, struggling a bit. Malfoy cocked his head slightly and watched her work.

He wasn't sure when the last time she'd undone a man's trousers was, if ever. Hermione was clumsy—nervous. She tugged his open trousers down past his hips, letting them hang slack, letting the cold buckle of his belt remain there, open. Then, hesitating, she touched the band of his underwear.

"Good," Malfoy breathed again, watching her. "You're doing wonderfully."

She slid her hand under the band and Malfoy felt her slim fingers graze his cock. Hermione slid her hand around his shaft and then pulled him out.

Malfoy exhaled raggedly and thrust against her soft palm.

Hermione struggled with the condom a little. She positioned it at his tip and it slipped free. She finally got it right on the third try, rolling it clumsily over him

"Lay back," he instructed, using one hand to fit the condom more securely.

Hermione did. Malfoy placed his hand over her cunt, then used two fingers to spread her open.

His heartbeat rang in his ears. She was pink and swollen and glistening, and when he brushed the tip of her clit with his thumb he watched the entire area clench.

Malfoy dropped a single kiss to her clit, making her stomach shudder,

Then he climbed on top of her. He lowered his body carefully over hers, bracing his weight up with his elbows. He kissed her neck, smiling against her skin at the way the kisses relaxed her.

He shifted his hips down.

Malfoy's cock pressed flush against Hermione, full contact without entering. Just pressing together.

He lay on top of her like that for a while, enjoying the heat of her soft body.

"Everything alright so far?" he asked in her ear.

"Yes..."

Malfoy's hand crawled atop hers, and he laced their fingers together.

He rocked lightly against her, and Hermione made a choked little gasp at the feeling. He shifted back and then forward. The hard head of his cock bumped her entrance. He was heavy, and strong. Hermione exhaled against his cheek, too pinned down to move.

"You want me to push in?" he asked softly. He licked her throat, her bell. "Ask me."

Hermione didn't speak, but the color in her cheeks was high and her eyes appeared feverishly glassy as Malfoy continued, almost idly, to maintain a wet, lazy friction between them.

"Oh—" she cried, when his shaft slid over her clit. He did it again and again. Hermione's head turned into the bed, her eyes slitting shut at the sensation.

Malfoy tipped her head back to face him with one firm touch of his hand.

"Tell me what you want."

Hermione's hand had snuck between them and was now on her clit—not rubbing, not even making any sort of conscious movement, just pressing and fumbling like she didn't know how else to sate herself.

Malfoy dragged her fingers away. If she wanted to feel good she would need to say—

"Yes," Hermione gasped, resistance crumbling. "Please, okay—yes, inside—yes, Malfoy—"

He hissed in victory, pinning her wrist firmly to her hip and using his knee to force her legs wider apart. Then Malfoy pushed himself inch by inch into her, his heart hammering in his throat.

"Oh fuck," he hissed, nearly in agony, as he watched her cunt swallow half his cock.  
"Finally."

She was tight—not quite ready—but very wet. Hermione was making little gasping noises of disbelief as Malfoy pressed into her. Her thighs—soft, golden—trembled. He gripped one and held it steady, doing his best not to give into the urge to bear down and snap in and out as fast as he wanted to.

The condom on his cock, the barrier between skin to skin, was intolerable. But Malfoy forced himself to focus on Hermione's face instead.

"Look at me," he cooed. "Good girl. Good girl, *good girl*. Do you feel me inside you?"

He was half-deep in her. Hermione made a little whimper that might have been of pain and Malfoy slowed at once, ready to pull out. When was the last time something had been inside her?

"Does it hurt?" he asked, squeezing her hip.

"A little," she gasped, staring up at his face. Not breaking eye contact—giving him every bit of her pink cheeked, glassy eyed attention. "It's okay—it feels good—"

"You want me to keep going?" Malfoy asked softly, letting his hand slide from her thigh down to her cunt. Her clit. He pressed it with two fingers, in a slow circle, taking advantage of Hermione's nod and her little clench of pleasure to slide a little deeper into her. He was three quarters of the way in, and he decided she wouldn't be able to take more than that today.

Hermione cried out when he pinched her clit between his knuckles.

"Malfoy," she gasped. "I think I'm—I think I'm going to—"

With his thumb pressed to her clit, he rocked out, then in again. Sliding slowly in and out, never pushing fully into her. Making sure it wasn't painful.

"Oh God," Hermione gasped. The sound was drunk—almost frantic. "I'm—"

She screamed.

Her walls clamped tight around Malfoy and he hissed.

Her orgasm was intense and long—she rocked under him, her cries melting into hiccups of pleasure, and Malfoy rocked into her with less control, unable to stop himself.

"I'm going to come," he hissed in her ear.

Hermione, still vibrating with orgasm, unexpectedly started panicking.

"Pull out," she whimpered. "Please—I changed my mind, pull out—"

Malfoy snarled.

His hips stuttered. He was wrapped in drunken pleasure, and he was used to being the one giving orders. Dominant by nature, a control freak, but the note of fear in Hermione's voice overrode everything.

He pulled out. Malfoy was already past being able to control his orgasm, and he tore the condom off and pressed his cock to her stomach, sliding his palm over himself until he came

with frantic urgency. As pleasure hit fever peak, Malfoy slid two fingers into Hermione, barely aware he was doing it. He just needed to *feel* inside her.

He managed to draw another orgasm out of Hermione just as he spilled onto her stomach. Malfoy groaned and stripped his fist a little faster.

His balls seemed only half empty or maybe that was just his frantic need to have finished inside instead of on her. The relief was only surface level and he already felt the frenzy of needing to push inside her once more.

“No more,” she breathed, her hips shaking uncontrollably as he ground his palm against her clit. “Please—mm—Malfoy—“

He relented. Hermione reached for him and he held her, biting down on her neck out of raw instinct. He licked the sting away and mouthed at her soft skin, and Hermione giggled sleepily.

“You’re so perfect,” he said into her ear.

Hermione shifted against him, turning towards him so his cock fell flush against her soft stomach.

“Are you mad?” she said into his chest.

Malfoy kissed her forehead.

“Of course not. There’s always next time.”

Curled in blankets together for the rest of the morning, Draco imagined Hermione as a precious gem in a soft nest he’d crafted for them.

He tried not to think about how badly he wanted to keep her locked there forever, chained to him, knowing that was not the kind of husband she wanted. But he could only do so much about his instincts.

-

Wrapped in Malfoy’s arms, warm with his affection and the afterglow of her orgasm, Hermione battled the confusing and growing flame of warmth in her heart.

A deep fondness for Malfoy, one she didn’t know what to do with.

She didn’t want to think the word *love*. She knew it couldn’t be that.

But still the word rose, sanguine and unbidden, like a plume of scarlet ink floating in water. Surfacing up as though by nature and the shift of physics and the unbypassable, molecule-altering forward movement of time.

-

Crow, it turned out, loved shiny things.

He trotted into the bedroom with a glinting something in his mouth.

Hermione rose to a sitting position, Malfoy's arm still tight and comforting around her waist. He didn't loosen his hold, instead sliding his fingers to her hip and clutching her there instead. Hermione squeezed his fingers.

"Come here, Crow," she called to the kitten. Her voice was hoarse and lazy. "What is that?"

Crow dropped the object at her feet, on the wooden floorboards. It fell with a clatter. A gold bracelet—Hermione recognized it as Pansy's.

"Crow," Hermione exclaimed, shocked. She picked up the heavy bracelet. "Did you *steal this?*"

Malfoy shifted his head up to look, then laughed.

"Your cat's a thief," he murmured, nuzzling his face into her waist. "Sweetheart. Darling..."

Hermione was distressed by the prospect of Crow's moral decline.

"We don't steal," Hermione said firmly to the cat. "No, Crow, we *don't* steal things..."

Crow just meowed proudly and sauntered away.

Malfoy laughed again.

"He's got a promising future in crime," Malfoy said, getting out of bed.

His naked body was long and planed and statue-like. The condom—empty, since the contents of it had gone onto her stomach instead—was still on the bed. Hermione looked at it and then, flushing, looked away.

She focused instead on the way Malfoy tipped her face up, the loving way he kissed her, cradling her jaw. The possessive, adoring hunger in his voice when he whispered:

"I'm glad I stayed with you today."

She smiled giddily up at him, wringing her hands in her lap.

"Stay tomorrow too," she wheedled.

"I'll try."

He smiled fondly down at her, his eyes tracing her face. Hermione squirmed happily under the attention. A perfect, sweet moment.

And then, with the sudden and ominous vibrato of a glacier breaking, there was a loud cracking noise.

Hermione jumped. Her hand, pressed to Malfoy's hard stomach, slid to his fingers and clutched his hand out of nervousness.

"It's alright," he promised her, rubbing her shoulder. "Calm down. It looks like someone is trying to send a Floo message—probably Dolohov."

Hermione stared at the Floo in Malfoy's bedroom. The hearth was cold and dark, excepting a bright spark of flame that seemed to be attempting again and again to take light. The crackling sound came from its failed attempts at igniting.

Malfoy's security wards—glaring, golden and strong—crushed the flame each time. Keeping it out.

Hermione relaxed slightly, soothed by the reminder of how powerful Malfoy's magic was.

Malfoy loosened her fingers from his and kissed her forehead. He went to the fireplace and stood before it, examining the sparks.

"It's Dolohov," he confirmed. "No, you don't need to cover yourself, sweetheart. He won't come in. Just a call."

With a snap of his fingers the wards loosened.

A green fire burst forth fully into life, as though gasping for breath after the suffocating confines of Malfoy's security spells. Even now though, a glowing grid of magic caged the flame in. Keeping it from bursting brighter. Voice only, no room for anyone to step through

"Another unscheduled call?" Malfoy asked, sounding unbothered. A little amused.

But the smile fell from his face a moment later.

"We found a wand," came Dolohov's voice. It sounded exhausted—breathless, and in the background was the whipping sound of wind and tide. "Weasley's. And—"

The wind picked up, and Dolohov's voice was drowned out.

"Where are you?" Malfoy asked, staring into the fire.

"Cornwall. We found him—a couple others, we let the rest go. We have his wand—"

"Was it a match?" Malfoy interrupted impatiently.

A brief pause, more snapping of wind. Somewhere in the background, other Death Eaters called out to each other. There was an unmistakable energy in the air, that Hermione—wrapped in blankets as she was, safely in Malfoy's bedroom as she was—couldn't help but shiver at.

Things were *happening*. Somewhere out in the world, this very moment, the Death Eaters had made progress on some dark, unknown goal.

"No," Dolohov said finally. "Not a match."

"So it's Longbottom's wand we need," Malfoy said, straightening up. "Gather the rest of the men. Everyone. We need to find it before the Order realizes what we're looking for."

"Already on it. He was buried without his wand—we're searching his grandmother's place. Nothing yet. I've sent men to check old property records, seeing if there are any unaccounted for estates he might have holed away his belongings—"

"Just find it," Malfoy said coldly, and Hermione shrank back against the pillows at the raw, serious violence in his voice. "Get it done."

Dolohov seemed to hesitate. Then, with no shortage of apprehension, he said:

"Your girl was a friend of Longbottom. You need to ask her, mate. Maybe even Veritaserum  
—"

Hermione drew the blankets higher, her eyes darting from the fireplace to Malfoy. He was looking away from her, into the hearth. His posture set in the rigid, coiled violent stance of a soldier. He turned his face the barest bit to Hermione.

"Do you know where Neville Longbottom's wand is, pet?" he asked gently, loud enough for Dolohov and Hermione to both hear.

Hermione met his hard grey eyes. She mutely shook her head.

Malfoy cast a quick, ascertaining glance at her expression. He detected nothing amiss in her face.

"She doesn't know," Malfoy told Dolohov. "She's a good girl."

Dolohov didn't seem as convinced as Malfoy, but reluctantly moved past the point. They continued talking strategy.

But Hermione wasn't listening any more.

She clenched her fingers anxiously around the edge of his blanket. Her hands shook for the first time in weeks.

Because Hermione hadn't lied—she *didn't* know where Neville Longbottom's wand was. Not for certain.

But she knew other things.

That Neville Longbottom didn't have any family in the world other than his grandmother, with whom his relationship had been troubled.

That he'd fallen in love only once, deeply and intensely and with a Slytherin girl, despite the disapproval of the few people who'd known of their secret relationship.

That his girlfriend had never gotten over him.

And that it seemed plausible that the wand the Death Eaters were traveling the world in search of might be in this very house.

# Chapter 21

"I'll be back soon," Malfoy said, shrugging a shirt on. "I'm sorry to leave."

"It's fine," Hermione said, doing her best to remain calm. "I'll stay here with Crow. Be careful."

He smiled fondly and pinched her cheek.

"I'll bring you more gifts," he promised.

She tried to smile back. It was clear Malfoy's attention was already split, already fixed on the business of the wand. Hermione remained silent, the better to let him get dressed and suited. She didn't want to distract him and inadvertently cause him to forget some key piece of armor. She didn't want him to get hurt.

He finished getting ready, then swooped down to kiss her temple, his hand resting on the back of her neck. He squeezed her there a little.

"I'll miss you," he whispered.

Then he stood and disappeared into the green flames.

Hermione stared after him as the fire flickered into embers. The fireplace seemed to Hermione like some kind of portal, whisking Malfoy in and out of her universe. A universe that, now, held an extra layer of complexity.

Hermione knew something Malfoy didn't.

Something *important*.

The thought was hard to internalize. It felt impossible, somehow—how could she know something Malfoy didn't?

The overwhelming urge was to tell him. To blurt it all out and let Malfoy decide what to do. To have him absorb the responsibility.

But Hermione tried to shelve the instinct. Being strategic was nearly a forgotten habit to her now, but even now—naked in Malfoy's plush bedding, a silver chain around her throat—Hermione recognized that having this information was a rare bit of power.

If nothing else, she was driven by curiosity. Why on earth was every Death Eater in the regime searching for Neville Longbottom's wand?

Crow—entirely unbothered by the events of the world, thinking only of cat food and milk, probably—tapped Hermione's knee with his paw. He rolled onto his back, thin tail whipping.

Hermione stroked his stomach. Her hands trembled still.

"It's easier not to worry about anything, though," she whispered to Crow. "Right?"

Crow yawned in assent.

Hermione continued running her fingers idly through his silky fur. She let her mind wander to Pansy.

Did Pansy know whose wand the Death Eaters were looking for? It seemed wildly improbable. Hiding this information would have required a skill for subterfuge and risk tolerance far greater than Hermione had seen Pansy capable of. And Hermione was confident Nott didn't know. He would surely have leveraged the information to gain favor with the Death Eaters by now.

Hermione leaned forward, pressing her hands into the soft duvet of the bed and working hard to keep her heart rate steady.

Something cold and metal slid against her fingers, drawn down by the divot of pressure she was creating on the mattress, with the anxious press of her hands.

Pansy's bracelet.

Crow perked up when Hermione lifted it. He got to his feet and arched his spine proudly.

*I told you it was nice,* he seemed to say. *Even though you scolded me for bringing it.*

Hermione hesitated, then closed her fist around the bracelet and stood. She picked Crow up.

She was going to return Pansy's bracelet. And while she was there, she was going to see how much Pansy knew.

Hermione dressed herself, feeling oddly indecisive about what to wear and wishing Malfoy could do it for her. She opted for pajamas, even though it was daytime. As a young girl she'd often wished it was socially acceptable to be in sleep things all the time, and now she had the luxury of doing that.

Hermione tied her hair back with a pale green hair ribbon from the bathroom, then slipped the gold bracelet into her pocket left Malfoy's room in search of Pansy. She held Crow against her chest with one hand.

The living area was quiet and soaked in bright afternoon light. Each padded step of Hermione's feet on the rugs made her think of two names.

*Neville and Pansy. Neville and Pansy.*

It came with a bizarre sense of nostalgia, thinking of the couple. How often had Hermione discussed the unlikely pairing with Harry and Ron? Back when there seemed little more relevant than Neville's disastrous choice in romantic partner. Before things got bad enough that nobody cared who anyone was sleeping with.

Nobody was on the ground floor of the house, which Hermione had mostly expected. And so she ended up at the foot of the large curved staircase, looking up.

She had never ventured upstairs before.

Crow wriggled in her arms, clearly annoyed by the pause in walking rhythm. Hermione kissed the side of his head for fortitude. Then she went up the stairs.

The marble steps were cold and smooth and broad under her socked feet. The stone was polished to a shine, reflecting in a soft glow the light from the arched windows in the foyer.

The journey upstairs was even longer than it looked, the staircase winding up doubly tall due to the high ceilings. At the top of the stairs was an open door through which appeared to be a bedroom. Hermione walked towards it, then hesitated at the sound of cutlery clinking.

Only one set of cutlery. Maybe Pansy was alone?

Or Nott was alone.

"Hello?" Hermione called, hesitating at the threshold.

A pause in the clinking.

"Granger?" came Pansy's—none too pleased—voice. "Good lord, am I to expect you at every turn—"

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, entering immediately, awash with relief that she wouldn't have to face Nott. "I just—my cat got your bracelet."

Pansy looked affronted at Hermione barging in. Her room was huge and airy and seemingly too big for the few pieces of furniture in it. Or perhaps that was the style. There was a king bed, two twin dark wooden dressers, each as tall as Hermione, and a gleaming white vanity table. Pansy was sitting at an oblong two-person dining table by the bright, sheer-curtained windows.

Maybe it was the white color of the curtains, or the pale tone on tone eggshell of the walls and crown moldings, but the whole room—with Pansy in the center—had a distinctly bridal milieu. But then Hermione realized this was because there was an actual wedding gown on a mannequin next to Pansy, dotted with pins and blending in with the white frothy curtains.

Hermione, realizing Pansy was waiting impatiently, quickly fumbled in her pocket to produce the bracelet. She lifted it to show Pansy

"Oh," Pansy said, recognizing the bracelet. She was eating a lunch of what looked like steamed vegetables and a glass of white wine. With the rim of her wineglass, Pansy gestured towards the vanity table.

"You can just leave it there," she said.

The vanity was covered in glittering objects. No wonder Crow had found it irresistible.

Hermione carefully placed the bracelet next to a porcelain tray of prettily arranged rings, earrings and bracelets.

She felt much less grown up than Pansy, in this moment. Pansy who had a vanity, who had jewelry. Whom nobody ever dressed, chose pajamas or gowns for...

But a little voice in Hermione's head pointed out that Pansy's independence had certainly not bought her any happiness.

"Okay," Pansy said crisply, turning back to her plate. "You can go now."

"I actually wanted to talk to you," Hermione said, shifting her weight awkwardly.

Pansy met her eyes again. Hermione noticed that she wasn't wearing makeup, and that she looked a bit more fragile without her painted lips and darkened eyebrows. She was in a bathrobe, maybe fresh out of a shower.

"About what?" Pansy asked, biting down on a piece of steamed carrot.

"I have questions," Hermione said uncomfortably. "About—what the Death Eaters are doing."

Pansy just looked at her for a moment. Then she laughed, hard.

"You've come to the wrong person," she said, wiping her eyes. "The right person is the one you're fucking."

Hermione wanted to disappear into the ground. Her face burned with embarrassment.

"He doesn't tell me everything," she protested. "He doesn't want me to worry."

Pansy snorted, then stood and brushed past Hermione to sit at her vanity. She untwisted her hair from its black towel and then started poking through her porcelain dish of earrings before finding a pair that she liked.

Hermione tried not to dwell on the fact that the only jewelry *she* wore was a bell and Malfoy's ring, which were strung around her neck on a chain with no clasp.

"Well, what do you want to know?" Pansy asked. "It's not like *I'm* the most informed person about it all."

"Do you know what they're looking for?" Hermione asked. "The Death Eaters?"

"Ye-es," Pansy said, fixing a pair of golden, knot-shaped studs to her earlobes. Her nails were painted mauve today. Hermione tried to imagine leaving the house to get her nails done, and the thought felt unfathomable. Like something from a fairy tale. "A wand, isn't it?"

"Yes," Hermione breathed.

"Theo's obsessed with it too," Pansy said, still sounding bored. "He wants to know which wand and why. As though it's any great mystery."

"You know?" Hermione asked, shocked.

Pansy rolled her eyes in the mirror.

"I mean, it must be for some kind of weapon, right?" she said. "Probably—the Elder wand? I dunno."

Hermione exhaled. She wasn't sure if she'd been hoping that Pansy would or wouldn't know that Neville's wand was the one everyone was hunting for.

"The Elder Wand was destroyed," Hermione said.

"Oh," Pansy said indifferently, leaning back and examining her reflection. She undid the earrings and dropped them back in the dish. Crow wriggled, eyeing the glittering studs with eager eyes. "I suppose. Either way, it hardly matters. They're just going to use it to kill a bunch of people."

"Maybe it's not for a weapon," Hermione said. Malfoy had told her it had nothing to do with the Order. "Maybe it's for something else—do you have any ideas—?"

"It could *only* be for a weapon. Why else would it be so important? The Commander's leaving no stone unturned, and Draco has every Death Eater out on the field. It's to win the war, obviously. Destroy the Order once and for all. Maybe even fully seize the Ministry—that's what Theo thinks."

"No," Hermione said at once. "No, Malfoy promised it's nothing to do with that sort of thing."

Pansy's eyebrows lifted, and her eyes met Hermione's in the mirror.

"He *promised?*" she repeated to Hermione. Pansy laughed a little sadly. "Oh, poor thing. I've got some bad news for you about men."

~

Hermione probably could have learned more from Pansy, who continued to seem sympathetic and greatly amused at her naïvité. But instead, she lingered just long enough to not seem too obviously to be fleeing from embarrassment, then made up an excuse to leave.

Crow squirmed out of her arms near the kitchens, so Hermione left him to saunter in and loudly meow at the staff for his food.

Malfoy wouldn't lie to her, Hermione said again and again in her head. Not an anxious mantra as much as a statement she rolled around in her brain, trying to see if she believed it.

Malfoy wouldn't lie to her.

Would he?

Her stomach made a loud grumbling noise and Hermione realized she had gone yet another twelve hours without eating. She felt faint—surely some of the feelings of disquiet and nausea had to do with hunger—but she'd ignored hunger before and she dismissed the sensation now.

Instead, Hermione kept herself busy in the bedroom for the rest of the afternoon. Alternating between sitting in the chair by the window, and looking out at the grounds, and standing abruptly to pace around in a little circle by the fireplace. Waiting for Malfoy to come home.

Malfoy, who wouldn't lie to her. She was *almost* sure.

He returned in the early evening. Hermione stood eagerly at the sight of him stepping out of the fireplace. She experienced a tide of relief and happiness, just seeing him come back home.

"Hi," she said, smiling when he met her eyes.

He seemed surprised she was still in the bedroom.

"I thought you'd be reading in my office," he said with a fond smile. He unbuckled his outer robes. "I missed you."

There was blood and bruising on the knuckles of one of his hands.

"What's wrong with your hand?" Hermione asked curiously. "It's swollen."

Malfoy looked down and flexed his fingers.

"Not too bad," he said. "I'll take a potion for the inflammation. Come here."

Hermione smiled and went to him; he kissed her nose and then her lips and she leaned happily against him.

"I came back early," he said in a lilting, teasing voice that vibrated gently through his chest.  
"I brought gifts."

"What gifts?"

"I'll show you later." His eyes skated across her face, he seemed to detect something unusual in her expression. "Are you alright?"

Hermione had been thinking about how to bring up the topic of the wand, and it was unfortunate to learn her face was so transparent.

"Um—yes," Hermione said quickly.

Malfoy didn't seem convinced. He looked her briefly up and down. He touched her hand—his fingers were warmer than hers.

"You haven't eaten," he said.

Hermione was amazed into silence. The Healer in her could guess that he'd identified the paleness of her face, the low circulation in her fingers. But the woman in her considered his careful, loving effort to pay attention to her needs a miracle.

"I haven't," she said softly. "I'm actually really hungry."

Hermione forgot—for a moment—what she had wanted to talk to him about. He smiled down at her, looking a little confused by her odd demeanor. She smiled back, and when Malfoy kicked his gear to the side and walked to her, playfully lunging at the last second, she squealed and giggled. He picked her up easily and sat in the armchair, settling her in his lap.

"Skin and bones," he teased, biting down on her shoulder. "And here I've been trying to fatten you up."

"Stop!" she giggled, pleased with their proximity. "Get me food?"

He summoned from a nearby cabinet a bottle of Ogden's. While pouring himself a finger of whiskey, he sent a message charm to the kitchens.

"*Vocare*," Malfoy said. "Miss Granger is hungry. Supper and tea, please."

The message seemed to ripple out through the air, like a visible soundwave. In its wake glimmered—briefly visible, before fading again—the many wards of the house. The entire estate was wrapped in magic. Malfoy operated it with all the dexterity and ownership of a watchmaker.

"Why haven't you eaten?" he asked, conjuring a cube of ice to drop into his glass. He leaned back, bringing Hermione with him, resting her against his chest. Hermione shifted her weight to fit more comfortably against him, and Malfoy placed a loving hand on her stomach. He kissed her head again. "Hunger strike, darling? Have I mistreated you?"

The word *strike* permeated her awareness at the same time as the sight of the split skin on Malfoy's knuckles, visible now and in stark relief against Hermione's clean, pink sleep shirt.

"I was mad at you," she said absently. "But then today I just forgot to eat. Hey, did you punch someone?"

"Three meals a day," Malfoy said, pulling his hand away. "Don't get distracted—did you hear me? Three meals, pet. Unless you feel ill, or too full. But then you have to tell me. Understand?"

"Yes," Hermione said, rolling her eyes.

"Good. Looks like your food is ready."

A dinner tray materialized on the table, the same way meals used to at Hogwarts, in the Great Hall. Hermione suddenly realized how ravenous she was. Malfoy dragged the table closer to her and she sat up, still in his lap, to eat.

"Ooh," she said, picking up a fork and pulling the plate of pasta towards herself. "This looks so amazing..."

Malfoy seemed content to watch her eat for a bit. He ran his thumb idly up and down her hip as she finished half a plate. His other hand held his glass of whiskey, which he continued to sip from.

"How did it go with the wand?" Hermione asked through a mouthful of food.

"Fine," Malfoy said. "Dolohov is leading the search tonight. I came home to be with you. What did you do while I was gone? I want to hear all about your day."

"I gave the bracelet back to Pansy," Hermione reported, swallowing her food. "Um. I played with Crow. And—well, I was thinking about something."

"Oh?" Malfoy asked. He held the glass of whiskey up to Hermione's lips, offering it, and she leaned forward to take a sip. The liquor was cold and acrid between her lips, and Hermione made a face. Malfoy laughed quietly. "What were you thinking about, darling?"

Hermione wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. How should she phrase her question? She wanted Malfoy to tell her again that the wand had nothing to do with the Order.

"Just—how I don't want you to keep leaving the house," she said, playing with her fingers. "The wand seems really important, for you to have to go all the time...?"

Malfoy poured himself more whiskey. He seemed relaxed.

"Don't worry, I'm sure we'll find it soon," he said, stroking her hip. "And then I won't need to leave so much. Eat some more—I can hear your stomach still."

Hermione obliged him, waiting and hoping he would give her more information. When he just kissed her shoulder, she threw subtlety to the wind.

"I know you don't want me to ask," she said. "But I really want to know what the wand is for. I'm so curious—and it impacts me, don't you think? Because you go out all the time to search for it—"

"Leave it, darling," Malfoy said, a little warning in his voice. "I like your curiosity. But let's direct it to something other than the war."

"But it has nothing to do with the Order, right?" Hermione asked desperately. "You did tell me that already—"

Malfoy clicked his tongue. He took the fork from Hermione's hand and set it down on the table.

"What's gotten into you?" he asked in her ear, not without amusement.

"I can't ask questions?" Hermione protested, as Malfoy nipped the skin where her shoulder met her neck.

"You can. But I think you know what I'll say. Why don't you take a guess?" he said into her skin. His fingers found a tense knot of muscle in her hip and he rubbed it in a soothing circle. "Based on our previous conversations."

Hermione remained stubbornly silent.

"Hermione," Malfoy said.

There was a warning in his voice now. *Behave.*

"You would say we had a deal," Hermione whispered. Her hands wrung the napkin in her lap. "That I promised not to ask about the things you do."

"Yes," he said. He tugged the napkin from her hands, then held her fingers still. "Don't be nervous, darling. Just talk to me. Why the sudden resurgence of anxiety?"

"I just—don't know why this wand could be so important," Hermione said, wiggling her fingers in his palm. "I just don't want people to get hurt."

"Don't you trust me?"

"Yes," Hermione whispered. "I do."

"Then leave the worrying to me. I won't let anything bad happen to you."

She hesitated, then nodded.

*Would Malfoy lie to her?*

*No,* came the answer in her mind. *No, I don't think so...*

"Are you still hungry?" Malfoy asked.

He twirled some pasta onto the fork and offered it to her. Hermione shook her head and pushed his hand away.

"I'm full," Hermione said. "Thank you."

"Very polite, sweetheart." He took the bite of pasta for himself.

"I don't want you to be lonely," he said after a moment. "I was hoping Crow would help. Where is he?"

"Out in the house somewhere," Hermione said. "He likes wandering."

"It's good to keep track of what your pets are up to, you know," Malfoy said, sounding amused. He picked up his glass of whiskey and sipped from it. "One day Crow might be discontented and then you'll have to bribe him with pasta and gifts to get him to tell you what's bothering him."

Hermione rolled her eyes and Malfoy laughed.

"Come here," he teased, dragging her close. Hermione giggled and shoved him. "So fussy. Have I been neglecting my girl?"

"It's so boring here when you leave," Hermione complained. "There's nothing to do, just walk around and read..."

"Poor girl. You're right, that's not the life I promised you, is it?"

"No, it's not," Hermione sniffed.

"Maybe I need to take you out of the house more? I can take you shopping. We can go on dates."

The thought gave Hermione an unexpected thrill of excitement.

"Dates?" she repeated softly.

"You like the sound of that?" he asked with a laugh.

"Yes," Hermione said, biting back a smile. "Dates where?"

Malfoy drained his glass.

"Wherever you like," he said, setting the crystal down on the table. "Should we go somewhere now?"

*Go somewhere?*

The prospect was staggering. He would be alright with taking her out of the house? To a shop? To a restaurant?

Hermione had the sudden vision of her and Malfoy at a fancy bistro. Did she even know how to dine out anymore? She hadn't eaten in a restaurant since before the war.

The rosy vision was shadowed abruptly by the realization that they wouldn't just be a couple on a date. People would recognize the Death Eater Draco Malfoy out with his captured pet, the imprisoned Order member dressed in suspiciously lovely clothes, a chain around her neck

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She looked away from him.

"Um," she breathed. "No, nevermind."

Malfoy observed her. He touched her cheek.

"Whatever you want," he said. "But you don't need to be shy. I'll make sure you're happy wherever we go. Don't worry..."

Hermione gave him a grateful smile.

"Let's just—have drinks here tonight," she said. "Like a date at home?"

Malfoy seemed to find the idea very endearing.

“Cute,” he said. “Sure, darling. Cocktails?”

She smiled widely, already excited at the idea of getting tipsy with him. It sounded fun.

And, Hermione thought as a distant, vague aside, maybe he would be more likely to entertain her questions with a few drinks in him.

~

Getting drunk in the safe house usually entailed bringing a bottle of cheap vodka or homemade liquor to one’s private quarters and then blacking out as efficiently and emotionlessly as possible.

Getting drunk in a *fun* way was a nearly forgotten concept to Hermione. But now, suppressing giggles as Malfoy perused a wine cellar under the kitchen, it was all coming back to her. She felt like a teenager on a Friday night.

“You have so many bottles,” she said in a stage whisper.

“I used to drink a lot,” Malfoy stage whispered back.

“Really?” Hermione was genuinely shocked.

He didn’t seem like the kind of man to indulge a vice like that.

“In my younger and more miserable years,” he said without embarrassment, examining a row of bottles.

Hermione felt a little twist of sympathy.

“Oh,” she said. “Well—I’m glad you’re not miserable now.”

Malfoy made a fond noise.

“You’re sweet, darling. Don’t worry. You make me very happy.”

Hermione smiled, pleased.

“You’re very good at giving affirming compliments,” she said, running her finger over some glossy butterbeer bottles. “You know, you seriously *would* be a good husband, I think. In some ways.”

Malfoy smiled, then dipped down to leave a quick kiss on her cheek.

“High praise.” He returned to perusing the shelves. “What’s your favorite drink?”

Hermione realized no one had ever cared to ask her that before. Malfoy saw her expression—frowning with deep thought—and smiled.

“Tough question?” he asked. “Let me rephrase. Imagine it’s our first date. What drink do I order for you, to endear myself to you?”

Hermione found she could only remember a handful of cocktails. Wartime meant that drinks were most often of the already-bottled variety—butterbeers, vodka—rather than mixed concoctions.

“Martini?” Malfoy guessed, holding up a bottle of gin.

“No... maybe something sweet..?”

Malfoy picked up a bottle with a green apple on it and held it up together with a bottle of cognac.

“Corpse reviver,” he suggested. At Hermione’s blank look, he went on: “It’s tart and sweet.”

“Perfect,” she said happily.

Malfoy made himself a gin and tonic. They returned to the room—Hermione still giggling as Malfoy peppered her with kisses, making her slosh her drink onto the floor—and Malfoy refreshed what she spilled with the bottles he’d brought from the liquor cabinet.

“Sit,” Malfoy said, putting her glass onto the table and pulling out a chair for her.

“Ooh, are we facing each other like a proper date?” Hermione said eagerly. She slid into the seat and struck a sophisticated pose with her cocktail glass. “What an excellent table they gave us.”

“Yes, well, I know the owner,” Malfoy said with a crooked smile, lowering himself into the chair opposite her. “And I had to pull out all the stops. It’s our first date, after all.”

“Ah yes, a *first* date. In this fantasy, how did you manage to convince me to go out with you? You must know I generally decline Slytherin advances.”

“Houses don’t matter when souls align as well as ours do, dear,” Malfoy said with a lazy smile. “It was easy. I visited you often at work, at your little bankrupt bookstore. I brought garden roses and made you laugh.”

“Fine,” Hermione said, biting back a smile. “Well, I’m afraid now comes the harder part. I’m a very difficult date to woo.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes. For example, I’m already bored.”

Malfoy laughed.

“Unrealistic, sweetheart,” he said. “I would have no trouble impressing you.”

"Arrogant," Hermione said through pursed lips, miming writing down a flaw in an imaginary notebook.

Malfoy smirked. His gin and tonic was half-gone, and he finished the rest of it.

"Alright, let's get serious then," he said, sliding his empty glass to the side. "I can see you're a discerning sort of girl. What information would you be trying to glean from our date?"

"I'd obviously be trying to determine if you were worth the effort of getting dressed up for," she said. "So—tell me about yourself. Mr... Malfoy, was it?"

"Ouch," he said with a lazy smile. "Draco Malfoy, yes that's me. We did go to school together, you know."

"Well, my many suitors blend together," Hermione said airily.

"Of course they do, Miss Granger. How shall I aim to stand out among the crowd?"

"It will be difficult," Hermione said somberly. "You see, you're not physically my type at all, so you're already at a disadvantage..."

"Liar," Malfoy said, his eyes sparkling. "You like tall men. Muscular. Quidditch players. I'm all three."

Hermione's stomach did a little somersault. It felt weird to be so transparently understood.

"Um," she said, regaining her bearings. "Well—"

"Oughtn't you be writing this down?" he asked, glancing down at the imaginary notebook on the table before her. "*Handsome. Fit. Disarmingly attractive sense of humor.*"

"You're unbearable," Hermione laughed. "I need a second cocktail to even tolerate you."

"You're not even done with that one yet."

Hermione tipped back her drink and downed the rest of it while Malfoy watched through increasingly amused eyes.

"Easy," he said with a smile.

She handed him her empty glass and Malfoy made her another drink. Then he popped open the bottle of gin and poured himself another measure as well, adding barely a splash of tonic water to his glass.

"No lime, or anything?" Hermione asked, eyeing a little queasy at the sight of his spirit-heavy drink.

"Drink is drink," he said, clinking his glass to hers.

"Well, let's continue. You were about to tell me about yourself. To see if we are compatible."

"Ah, yes. And what do you want to know?"

"Hm... likes and dislikes would be a good start."

Malfoy's gaze was warm with interest. He smiled and leaned back in his seat, rubbing his jaw.

"Well," he said, his eyes flashing. "I like you."

Hermione blushed.

"That's—" she fiddled with her cocktail glass, flustered in spite of herself. Malfoy smiled.  
"That's not a real response."

"Very well," he said slowly, running his finger down the condensation on his glass. "I love you, then."

# Chapter 22

## Chapter Notes

CW in end notes

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Hermione fumbled with the glass and it fell from her fingers. Malfoy caught it before it could slip off the table.

"You shouldn't joke like that," Hermione said. The color in her face was high; she looked panicked and not a little disbelieving. "Not even when we're pretending."

"I'm not joking," Malfoy said. "Though I'm sorry for alarming you. I suppose it is rather forward for a first date, isn't it?"

Hermione's fingers pressed to the table, so hard that her knuckles turned pale. Malfoy observed them—he noticed a small degree of tremor had returned to her hands, though very slight. He would give her another Dittany bath tonight.

"There's no need to be so stressed," he said.

Her hands folded themselves into a nervous knot.

"Love is serious," she said, eyes shining. Like she was imploring him to agree. "Malfoy—this isn't love."

"Why not?"

"Because," Hermione said. There was a trace of her old bossiness in her tone now. "You can't love someone you're keeping with you by force. It's an infatuation. Maybe a—sexual fixation."

"I see," Malfoy repeated, leaning back in his seat. He tapped his glass. "Alright. Well, have *you* been in love before?"

Hermione hesitated.

"No," she finally admitted. Malfoy smiled, pleased to have this suspicion confirmed. "I haven't."

"May I suggest then that you might not be fully qualified to determine the nature of my feelings?"

"Come on, Malfoy. Everyone knows what love is."

"I'm told I don't," he said lightly, still amused. "Maybe we can get to the bottom of this, if you share your definition of love."

"Poets have been trying to define love for centuries," she said. "Surely you're not saying I need to define it in order to recognize this isn't—"

"Surely," he interrupted smoothly. "My brilliant girl isn't attempting to use a fallacy of ambiguity to make her case?"

Hermione's mouth snapped shut. She glowered at him.

"Fine," she said. "You're perfectly right. Allow me a moment to craft a more structured argument."

She glared down at the table while Malfoy watched, still smiling.

After a while, Hermione picked up her cocktail glass. It was mostly empty, with only a bare slip of cognac clinging to the bottom. She held it up to the light, thinking.

"Let's start with this glass," she said. Malfoy's eyebrows lifted but she just shot him a look. "Just listen. Now—it's fairly self-evident that I don't know every single thing about this glass. I don't know all the physical properties of crystal, for instance, nor where this particular glass was crafted, nor how many identical glasses were part of its set. But just because I don't know everything about the glass doesn't mean I know nothing about it. I still know very important qualities it has. Like its size, and its weight, and what it looks like when the light hits it just like this. In just the same way, I can share some important things I know about love, even without having been in love myself."

He nodded.

"Go on, sweetheart. Let's hear it."

Hermione cleared her throat, looking a little self-conscious, then darted her eyes to his.

"Right," she went on. "Here I go. I know that my parents were in love. I saw it every day, for my entire childhood. In the way they supported each other through dental school, or took turns making dinner... Life was sometimes hard, but they both helped shoulder the burdens."

She looked at him, and there was a faraway light in her eyes.

"They were partners," she said softly. "They built something together. And it wasn't always glamorous—but love is sometimes like that. Just the everyday, the boring stuff. Doing laundry, shopping for a flat. Only it's not boring, because you're doing it together. The stuff you and I can only pretend to do, Malfoy. That's real love."

"That sounds very nice," Malfoy said quietly. "So, if that's love. Then what do you call what we have?"

Hermione was still holding her glass up, and Malfoy gently stopped her from lowering it back to the table. He drained his own glass and slid it to her.

"You can use my glass too," he said. "As a visual aid."

That got a little laugh out of her. Malfoy squeezed her fingers very lightly before handing his glass over and she met his eyes with a little smile.

Hermione held both glasses before her.

"Okay," she said. "So this glass in my right hand is love. With my cognac in it. Now, your glass is what we have. I don't even know what to call it."

She considered it in the light. As though it really did contain the secrets of what love was or wasn't.

"You keep me here by force," she began, tipping her head to the side. "And—you make all the decisions. You take all the responsibility. There's no equal shouldering of weight between us—we aren't partners. Not to mention, you yourself had to make an irrationally large sacrifice by taking that Vow. And you did that to keep me here, all for you. You tied yourself to a promise, and I tied myself to you. See how different that is from what I described?"

"It sounds like I care about you very much. And that I'll do anything to keep you safe and happy."

"But it's not sustainable," she replied, though he noticed she didn't disagree with his statement. "You can't bear the burden of our problems—the burdens of real life—forever. You'll end up resenting me."

"We're starting to veer out of empirical fact and into the content of boilerplate marriage counseling," Malfoy said with a little smile. "Resentment comes from someone who doesn't want to do everything, who is forced to do it anyway. Resentment is what you were starting to feel towards the Order."

Hermione looked shocked. But not by his statement so much as the unexpected truth in it. Malfoy continued.

"You were partially right," he said softly, touching her fingertips. "Perhaps there is some element of fixation for me, though you're wrong that it's all sexual. I'm not the same as other people. I like owning everything. I like making the decisions, I like taking the responsibility. And I want someone to take care of. So your typical concerns may not be applicable here."

"Well—" she stammered. Her cheeks were pink, as they always turned when they started discussing his proclivities. "Love requires both parties to be free. To choose to stay with each other. And I'm not here by choice."

"Would it have been love to leave you to die in that safe house? Is that the best way for me to love you? To stand by and watch as you bled yourself to death?"

Hermione didn't have a response for that.

"Your theory is solid enough," he said quietly, not looking away from her. Her brown eyes were wide and dark, soft and wet-looking in a way that seemed exclusive to those pure of heart. Malfoy would never tire of looking at them. "But I'm afraid, as with so many theories, it can't just hold up in a vacuum. We need to let it into the real world, and see how it plays in true context."

He took his glass from her and idly tipped it back and forth in the light.

"You painted a pretty picture," Malfoy said. "Groceries, laundry. Flat shopping. I would give you all that if I could. But I'm afraid that world—the world your parents inhabited—is out of reach for us. We are in a war. And we are—the both of us—intimately tied to the genesis and ongoing efforts of that war. Our stars are crossed in that way, my dear. There is no flat shopping, there is no boring. Not for us."

Hermione's expression flickered, and then fell. Malfoy knew this was the coldest truth of them all. That all of her idle daydreams, all of her games of pretend, were no more than just that. Games.

He took her hand.

"But that's alright," he said quietly. "Because we have this. Something I made, just for you. You shouldn't have to live in a war, Hermione. It's all wrong. It's cold and it's cruel and it's too *harsh* for someone like you. I can't change our fates so that you and I meet in a muggle bookstore, just two nobodies with their whole, boring and beautiful lives before them—but I can make it so you never have to face the wrong world outside."

He took her glass from her, and held both in his hands. He set them on the table and brought them together.

"Love is caring more about you than you yourself do. It's being the bad man, so that I can protect your interests in ways you'd never be capable of."

Malfoy poured more cognac into both glasses.

"You're a good girl," he said quietly, picking up his glass and leaning back. He slid the other to her. "And I don't wish you were different. But you don't have it in you to walk on the darker side. To choose yourself over others. But I do. And I choose you, Hermione. Every single time."

Hermione looked at him for a long, long beat. Her eyes were round.

Then, to his slight surprise, she stood. He watched her approach, shifting back to make space for her to crawl into his lap when it was clear that was what she was going for. Hermione looped her arms around his shoulders and rested her cheek on his chest.

Malfoy lifted his hand to the back of her head and pressed lightly against her soft curls.

"Tired of talking?" he asked softly, amused.

"You're persuasive," she whispered back.

Malfoy laughed and Hermione buried her face into his shirt, seemingly embarrassed. He held her tightly, and she clung to him.

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They finished the rest of their drinks, with Hermione remaining in his lap. She seemed temporarily content to be pliant and soft, and he was happy to let topics wander to lighter and more playful things as she leaned against him.

"You said you had a gift for me," she wheedled. "Where is it? Is it another kitten?"

"One Crow is enough for now, I think," he said, amused. "Come on—I can show you what I got you. It's in my office."

This gift had been easy. A new little bookshelf. He covered her eyes until they were facing it, then let her see.

"Oh!" she gasped at once. "Wait—is this whole thing for me?!"

Unlike his tall, dark-paneled shelves, the new bookshelf he'd added to one wall was pale birch. It didn't quite fit in with the look of the rest of his office—but then, he liked how Hermione didn't quite fit in with the darkness of the rest of his life. The new shelf was delicate where his own shelves were stolid and unyielding. Carved prettily with leaves, blossoms, little meandering curlicues. He ran his hand along the side of it absently.

"It's for you," Malfoy said. "I know you have all my books to read, too. But I thought you might like some to call exclusively your own. If you want our arrangement to end, in the future—"

He paused very lightly there, but Hermione didn't jump in to correct his use of if. He smiled and continued.

"—then you're free to take all of these with you. They belong to you only. And there's plenty of space left—we can keep filling the shelves with whatever you like. I'll take you to Flourish and Blotts. It will be an excuse to go on dates."

Hermione had stars in her eyes. With an eager little breath she rushed forward to the shelf, sliding one particular book out. He already knew which one it would be.

"*Hogwarts: A History*," she whispered. "I haven't even *seen* a copy in years. Mine was in the castle when—and I think it was destroyed after the battle—"

She flipped it open, her hands shaking very slightly. Malfoy decided it was due to excitement rather than nerve damage, but he still reminded himself to increase the dose of Dittany in her bathwater later.

"I never thought I'd see one again," she admitted, and he heard the break in her voice. Hermione wiped her eyes.

"I love it," she finally said. "Thank you. Can we read here for a bit before bed?"

He kissed her temple and she accurately understood his assent.

Hermione rushed to the sofa and pulled the throw blanket over her legs.

Malfoy settled himself into the armchair and watched her for a few minutes. Hermione was over the moon and he drank the sight of it in.

"Stop staring," she muttered, not looking up from her pages. But she was smiling.

Malfoy laughed and looked away; he checked his watch.

It was half past nine.

He wondered how Dolohov was doing with the interrogation.

Ronald Weasley's wand may not have been a match, but the hunt had not been in vain. Presently, Weasley was locked in a cell in the Dolohov estate. They hoped that Weasley would be able to produce some information about Longbottom's wand—though neither Malfoy nor Dolohov were particularly optimistic. But it would be remiss not to check thoroughly.

For Malfoy's part, he took some vicious satisfaction in knowing Weasley was enduring some discomfort. Part of this was just the distant, long-burning resentment towards Weasley for his time with Hermione. Malfoy had to admit that perhaps his old schoolyard grudge was not quite so resolved as he'd like to admit.

He checked his knuckles briefly, distantly annoyed with himself for his lapse in self-control.

Dolohov was a good interrogator. He was thorough and had a reliable, consistent approach for things. All interrogations took around twelve hours, after which time the Death Eaters made a more final decision on whether the subject was likely to give any information or not.

Twelve hours from capture would be tomorrow morning. So Malfoy was surprised when he saw Dolohov's messenger sentry—a dark barn owl—appear outside his office window.

It was cold and dark outside. The pale heart-shaped face of the owl was barely visible, just a shadow of a shape, even lit as it was by the warm light from the window. But Malfoy detected the flicker in the wards and had let the owl in before it even fully lit on the sill.

The parchment was brief, the ink still somewhat wet.

*Weasley dead, the note started. My fault. Rookwood was left with him for an hour while I took a call. He used carelessly excessive force—I'll deal with him however you tell me to. For what it's worth, didn't seem like Weasley knew much anyway.*

*Waiting for your orders.*

Malfoy stared down at the words. A strong flicker of displeasure pulsed through him.

Dead?

Rookwood would need to be removed after this. To kill a prisoner? One who they were attempting to pull information from? It was recklessness at best. And at worst it was the early sign of rot in his ranks. Insubordination.

Malfoy knew well that the first sign of a Caesar's weakening control over the Roman troops was unauthorized deaths. Like all generals, he was a diligent student of the rise and fall of conquerors.

*Send Weasley's body to his family and instruct them to mourn privately, Malfoy wrote to Dolohov. And take care of Rookwood. Make sure the others see it.*

Malfoy swilled some gin in his mouth, then sat on the ottoman next to Hermione. His mind was running, cold and machine-like, with the trickle-down effects of Rookwood's actions. Who was close to Rookwood? He wasn't the kind who had many allies. Was this an isolated incident? Would Malfoy need to weed out further rotten soldiers from his troops—

But then Hermione, engrossed in her novel (she had already finished *Hogwarts: A History*), leaned sweetly against his shoulder.

"What's happening in the book?" he asked softly, gathering her closer against him.

"A tribe of dragons has gone missing," she mumbled, focused on her story. "And their eggs were just discovered, all frozen in some kind of icy pond. I think it was the enchanter from the North..."

He hummed quietly and nosed at her hair. Over her shoulder, he idly read a few passages of the story. It had been years since he'd read a story like this, all fantasy and escapism.

By the time Malfoy started running Hermione's bath, Dolohov had sent back the shattered hilt of Rookwood's wand. There were still a few smeared red fingerprints on the ruined wood. Malfoy read the magical signature. Rookwood's magic was dull and distant; its owner was dead.

Malfoy sent the wand back to Dolohov.

*Put it through the body's heart. Make sure a photo finds its way into the Prophet.*

Then he put the incident from his mind to focus on better things.

The Dittany in Hermione's bathwater, for instance, which smelled herbaceous and sweet. He rubbed it into her shoulders, her palms, and for the first time ever, Hermione tugged Malfoy into the water with her. He was shocked enough to laugh; Hermione was giggling and indifferent to his soaking clothes. She reminded him of a clawing little nymph, her wet fingers slippery on the back of his neck, on his cheek.

"Getting water everywhere," Malfoy breathed through a smile, pressing his knee between Hermione's thighs. Their movements were slower and heavier in the water, though it was still

easy to enjoy how much stronger he was than her. "I've spoiled you into thinking you can make a mess however you like."

"I *can*."

"You can," he agreed.

His clothes off, soaked trousers and shirt sodden on the marble ground. Slow rocking in the water, enough to apply friction to her most sensitive parts but still careful enough not to hurt her. His beautiful plaything, his perfect girl.

"Hook your ankle here," he muttered, opening her wide. "Good girl. Stay open. Eyes on me."

"Water's gonna get in me—" Hermione whined, twisting.

He pushed two fingers into her, making sure there was room for nothing else inside. Hermione shuddered and her head fell back, brown curls sticking to the smooth, wet marble edge of the tub.

"Ah—" she exhaled.

"Eyes here," Malfoy hissed, and Hermione lifted her face. Her cheeks were hot and her eyes glazed. "No coming. Understand?"

He worked his fingers insistently in her, pulsing them with each push or pull. Malfoy pressed the heel of his palm to her clit. Hermione's eyes fluttered—her mouth dropped open, Malfoy caught sight of her pink tongue—wet, soft—and the reminder of how flushed and wet she was made him bare his teeth.

He kissed her, and her mouth fell open like a parted fruit for him.

"I have to," she soon whimpered. The words were nearly lost between their mouths. Her hips pushed up, making shimmering bathwater rock up against the edge of the tub. "I have to, I have to—"

"No," Malfoy said, not slowing down his wet, curling motions inside her. His thumb worked in a firm, unbroken rhythm over her clit, and he felt her tighten around his fingers. "No you don't, darling. You just need a little training—"

Hermione came with a warbled scream. Malfoy let go of her clit, staring down at the way her cunt contracted spasmodically around his fingers.

"Ah!" Hermione gasped. There was a splash of water, a flailing movement as she tried to reach her own clit. Her orgasm rushing out of her without any friction, Malfoy could tell by the combined frustration and shock and agony on her face that it was her first ruined orgasm. "No, *no*—"

He imagined the water as a barrier, enveloping her into immobility, forcing her to absorb pleasure without letting her come to satisfaction. He groaned softly, then caught her hand and held it firmly at her face level. He lowered his body over hers, further holding her in place.

His other hand was still inside her cunt, which fluttered like a pinned butterfly, leaving slippery trails of fluid with each pulse. He pressed his damp forehead to hers, and the whole of his vision was taken up by her eyes. Squinting in overwhelm, her dark lashes wet and clumped, her pupils huge and vulnerable as her cunt clenched weakly around his hand.

"Good girl," he hissed. He pressed his aching cock to her hip. "It's alright, it's alright. That's my good girl."

"Why did you do that?" she whimpered, twisting under him. "Please, no—fix it—"

He did, and only made her bear one other ruined orgasm before dragging her out of the tub. He dropped her on the bed—her skin still wet, but tangled now in his sheets instead of submerged in bathwater—and wrapped her wrists in one of his much larger hands.

With his free hand he worked between her wet thighs. Hermione, as though sensing his shift in demeanor, the softening of his strict, punishing hunger—keened hopefully.

"Who do you belong to?" he said in her ear. "Let me hear you say it."

"You," Hermione. "You, you—Draco, please—"

*"Draco?"* Malfoy hissed in ecstasy. "So this is what it took—"

Hermione was the sweetest girl—the kind to cling tightly to him when her body was worn out and shuddering, the kind who wanted to fall asleep as close as possible to the one who'd made her scream. With her face buried against his chest, her breath soft and wet and soothing over his heart, Malfoy wondered how it was possible to want with such terrifying force something that was already his.

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It all would have continued just like this, just so perfectly, Malfoy was sure—were it not for the next morning. When the hands of fate arranged it such that his lovely girl learned that Ronald Weasley had died in captivity.

#### Chapter End Notes

Descriptions of violence, one of which is brief but gruesome. Character death (not Draco or Hermione, and not a main character). All in all, this chapter's got a bit of a bite to it. If you've come this far though, it's likely you're on board.

# Chapter 23

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

How long and languid times of peace felt. When something serious finally did intrude, it seemed to rush forth to meet the present moment with all the unyielding violence of cement meeting a falling body.

A sleepy, happy night.

A syrup-slow morning.

And then—when the cement arrived—

Hermione heard herself screaming before realizing she was doing so.

It was weird—in a distant, underwater, thuddingly hollow kind of way—to scream. A scream was for when you were in danger. For when you were in the line of fire, for when you were running from something.

Had she forgotten, in her soft time here in Malfoy's home, that there was another time for screaming too?

Grief.

*Grief.*

She was on her knees, clawing at the copy of the Daily Prophet Pansy had brought her. Clawing like she was trying to see what was under the words, like she was trying to discover a different story, a different reality, under the one printed indelibly in horrible, blood-black ink. Each letter of it disgusting, too much to look at, insensitive and intolerably callous in the way something so horrible could be captured by something so mundane as letters on a newspaper.

"I don't understand," she kept saying to Pansy, in between or perhaps during her screams. It didn't matter. "I don't understand—I don't understand."

Pansy looked sick, and for the first time Hermione realized a fraction—a bare shadow—of the pain she must have felt when Neville died. Hermione had never been in love with Ron, no. But what they shared had been precious in its own innocent way. And innocence held a premium during these times of war. Innocence was a long-lost, never recoverable thing. Even though things had long gone sour and quiet between Ron and Hermione—they would always be connected by their time in school, before the war.

When Harry died, Hermione had been unable to speak for three weeks after. Struck temporarily mute with the shock. Ron, too, had been destroyed. They could not look at each

other. He'd started hating her, she was sure. He left as soon as he could, had gone to a different safe house, one where the people were different and the battles were different and where he could leave everything behind.

It had been the three of them.

And now it was one.

Hermione sobbed on the ground, the hard marble under her knees biting dully into her skin. The necklace around her throat hummed. It heated briefly, a pulse of energy. Malfoy's magic, reading this flare of panic. Hermione knew before he appeared that he was coming.

Hermione—on the ground of the orangery, curled over the newspaper Pansy had brought her—saw his shoes first.

"What's going on?" came Malfoy's voice.

Hermione didn't even consider responding. She was too wrecked. His inquiry felt irrelevant.

When he touched her shoulder she didn't react. She felt far away from everything.

Malfoy was silent.

Then, in a louder, harder voice, to Pansy: "What's going on? What did you do to her?"

"I just gave her the paper," Pansy said shakily. "It was already in the paper, Draco. She deserved to know—they used to be together."

Pansy, of course, understood.

The copy of the Daily Prophet was crumpled and hot now, in Hermione's fists. She didn't let it go when Malfoy tried to take it from her, brought it close to her chest and choked on her sob. Wordless, anguished.

"What does it say?" Hermione heard Malfoy ask Pansy, fury in his voice clear as thunder.

"Weasley," Pansy spat back at him. "Just—Weasley."

And then Malfoy was silent.

Hermione shook on the ground, at his feet.

There was the rustle of fabric. A hushed, muttered command. Pansy left the room, her heels making clipping, cracking noises against the cold floor.

Then he was crouching down next to her. His hand on her shoulder, his warmth near her.

"Hermione," he said softly. "Come here. Let's go to the room, get up. It's cold here."

She looked at him. Through her swollen eyes, the world felt brighter and more painful.

"Ron is dead," she whispered.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. Come here, let's go. We can talk about it—"

He didn't seem surprised.

Hermione hadn't considered the possibility that...

"Did you kill him?" she whispered.

"No," Malfoy said at once.

"Did you *know*?" she asked.

Malfoy didn't answer. His mouth was closed in a hard, thin line. And his grey eyes were shuttered too.

The ragged pain in Hermione's chest sharpened into rage.

"Why didn't you—" She choked on her own breaths, which came fast and painful now. "Why didn't you tell me? When did you know?"

Malfoy reached again for her hand, he cast his eyes down, trying to see if her fingers were shaking—

"Don't touch me," Hermione said, lurching back.

His eyes flew back to hers. They darted once again between her own.

"I didn't kill him," he said again.

"Don't *touch me*," Hermione said, louder.

She staggered to her feet, and when Malfoy tried to help her up she shoved him hard in the chest.

"I didn't think you'd find out like this," he said softly. There was distance between them now, from her push, but he didn't move to close it. He seemed to know that if he did, he would only widen the chasm forming between them. "I didn't want you to be sad."

Hermione turned from him. He tried to follow but she struck his hand away when he reached for her, shoving him away again. She left the orangery, where Pansy had found her this morning, when she'd been looking for Crow. She'd thought about getting oranges for orange juice and—

*Hermione*—Pansy had said.

In that quiet, unsteady tone that was the universal lilt of *someone is gone*.

Malfoy followed her but Hermione didn't turn around. She couldn't bear to look at him. Down the hall she went, and though Hermione hoped he would leave her alone when she

entered their room, his footsteps—steady, even—followed a measured distance behind.

Hermione locked herself in the closet and slammed the door shut before he could come in after her.

She slid to the floor. And there, surrounded by the soft drapes of her clothes and the dark, heavy lines of his, Hermione cried.

—

Malfoy did not leave her alone for long.

Hermione had not really expected him to, but still when the soft knock at the door came she felt a dull, distant burst of anger.

"Go away," she said. "Please."

"Come out."

"No."

"Hermione. Come out now."

"Who killed him?"

Malfoy was quiet a moment, and she could almost hear him running through the decision tree of whether to tell her or not. Whether it would placate her.

"It doesn't matter," he finally said. "And—it was a mistake. Unauthorized."

She laughed, wild and broken.

"A mistake!" she said. "Oh, good. It's a mistake. Someone died and it was all just a mistake, how nice..."

"Did you love him?" came Malfoy's even, steady question.

Hermione slammed her fist against the closed door between them, hating him. What was wrong with him? Why didn't he *understand*? He was like an alien—

Malfoy opened the door. Of course, the lock was meaningless against him. He could open it without even saying the spell.

Hermione crawled away from him, but he picked her up, bringing her to her feet. Bringing her to his chest.

She shoved at him weakly, but he was strong. Her cheek to his chest, her tears soaking the front of his shirt.

"I hate you," she gasped, her eyes squeezing shut. "I hate you."

"You don't."

"I do," she hissed, wrenching away from him. His arms didn't yield but then she whined—an animal sound of pain, of fear—and he let go at once. "I do hate you, I do."

She needed it to be true.

"Let me make it right. Don't push me away."

She needed to be far from him. Hermione shoved past him, and when he tried to hold her she clawed at the backs of his hands. She wished there were more doors for her to slam, wished for vases to throw and windows to smash. She spotted her candle by the tall wall of windows.

Malfoy seized her wrist before she could hurl the candle.

"Let go!" she screamed.

"Hermione," he warned.

She tried to punch his chest with her other hand; he caught it too and she screamed like he was hurting her. He let go again; Hermione knew he couldn't stand the sound of her pain.

She lurched from him, knocking over a lamp and shattering it on the floor. She stepped through the shards to run out the room, feeling pieces slice through her socks, stick to the fabric and jab into her feet with every step.

"Hermione!" Malfoy roared after her. She ran—she went to his office, screaming out again in false agony when his levitation spell caught her, feeling viciously satisfied when he released her once more. Malfoy let out a frustrated snarl—maybe at his own weakness, his instinct of letting her go.

She knew he was at the end of his patience. The only implication this had was that she needed to do as much damage as possible before he grabbed her and held her down.

Her socks were sticky with blood. Hermione relished the pain. She wanted to destroy her comfort here, wanted to forget that she could have ever been soft and spoiled and happy in the walls of this home while outside, horrors unimaginable happened every day. She sought—like a bloodhound chasing a broken-legged hare—Malfoy's office. She reached her new bookshelf before even realizing that was what she'd been moving towards.

Hermione knocked her books to the floor. She hurled them at his windows, at his coffee table, at his desk. Crow yowled from somewhere in the office and darted out of the room, alarmed. Hermione ignored him. She tore pages out of her books and ground them into the floor with her bleeding feet. And when she reached *Hogwarts: A History*, Hermione wrenched the cover off with more strength than she knew she had. Leather and cloth and thread and glue, it came apart like nothing at all. Like nothing at all.

Suddenly Malfoy was upon her. He pinned her to the wall, snarling when she tried to wrench away.

His large hand, his strong fingers, caught her jaw and forced her to face him. She tried to bite his hand and he just squeezed her face harder.

Malfoy's eyes were full of hot fury. Full of something that might have been pain, if he were capable of feeling human emotions.

"*Enough,*" he hissed. Hermione tried to shove him back but his arms may as well have been iron bands—he bared his teeth.

"I hate you," she sobbed.

"You hate me?" Malfoy whispered, leaning closer. "You think I'm so villainous? So evil? *I* was the one to take you out of that tiny, dirty safe house, Hermione. I alone cared for you. *Weasley* left you there to rot, he never even cared to take you out of that hellhole—he doesn't deserve your mourning—"

"Don't say his name!" Hermione shrieked.

Rage and that non-pain, that almost but not quite aching of spirit, glinted in Malfoy's eyes.

"I've saved more than thirty Order members," he said, and if she didn't know better she might have thought there was an edge of desperation in his voice. "I didn't authorize Weasley's death. I can't save them all—he's just *one man*—"

"*I hate you,*" Hermione shrieked. She could hear the poison in her words, the burning acid that belied a level of anguish she didn't even know she was capable of. All these years into the war, and still learning new depths of pain—

"You don't hate me," Malfoy snarled with sudden and quiet viciousness. "In fact, I think you might love me."

Hermione reeled as though he'd slapped her.

She could not believe he'd voiced the thought. The soft, ugly center of what they'd been circling around, the unbearable thing she'd trained herself not to look directly at.

"No," Hermione said, and her voice was warped and shaky to her own ears. "I could never love you."

They were very close now, the strewn wreckage of Hermione's formerly beautiful little bookcase all around them. Hermione didn't know where to look, she suddenly could not bear to see the damage done to her precious leather covers, the torn pages like broken bird wings, pale and shredded all over the dark wooden floors.

She started to shake and Malfoy's fingers clenched tighter around her.

"That's enough now," he said, eyes burning into hers.

"I'm allowed to destroy whatever I want!" she sobbed. "These were *my* books, I loved them, I'm destroying my favorite things—I'm not hurting you, *I'm* the one in pain—"

Malfoy leaned forward suddenly, and his hand held her face solidly in place, or else she might have recoiled from the abrupt movement. His face was right in front of hers, the uneven pulse of his breath ghosting over her lips. He pressed his forehead to hers.

"*That is hurting me,*" he hissed.

Hermione shoved him away with a furious sob. Malfoy didn't move back, remained pressed to her, tense with coiled energy, staring unblinkingly into her eyes.

"Please," she begged, slumping against him. His hand held her face up, held her jaw rigidly in place, and she whimpered. "Please, Malfoy. Let me be alone, just for a little while."

"You called me Draco last night," he said softly.

Hermione didn't answer.

After a moment, he let go of her.

Hermione sagged. She covered her face and sank slowly to the floor.

Malfoy stood over her for a moment, watching. His breathing sounded a little heavy to her ears but Hermione couldn't be sure, with the ringing sounds of her own sobs all around.

Finally, he left.

When the door to his office closed, Hermione crawled to a corner of the room and drew her knees to her chin. She didn't want to sit on his sofa, didn't want to lie on the cushion of the green ottoman that had been her place for so long.

And when hot food and tea and new books appeared on the table a few hours later, Hermione didn't touch them.

—

It was pathetic to be so powerless, pathetic to realize that when everything fell apart—when she wanted to hurt Malfoy—there was nothing at her disposal.

In a poor attempt to make herself feel better, Hermione forced herself to imagine she might attack Malfoy. She tried to bring herself back to the mentality of her first week here. What could she use as a weapon? How might she escape?

With nothing else to do, Hermione found herself breaking her little bookshelf into kindling-sized pieces of wood. Dismantling the memory of Malfoy's kindness, his indulgence. Not with the same frantic anger and pain she'd had earlier—no, suddenly she felt devoid of any feeling at all. She broke the wood with dull, distant efficiency, alternatingly taking big pieces of it and breaking them under her knees or pressing on them with her full weight over the rug until they collapsed. She stowed a single fractured piece under the rug and tried to tell herself she could use it to stab Malfoy if she had to.

A stupid, childish game of pretend.

She felt impotent. Useless. A bird with a broken wing, angry at its cage. The blood on her socks dried, sticky and stiff.

At night, when Hermione knew Malfoy must be pacing his own room, waiting with mounting impatience and desperation to see her, Hermione emerged.

He was sitting right outside the doors to his office, had dragged a chair and faced it squarely at the doors, waiting. He stood at once at the sight of her.

She avoided his eyes. She didn't want to see his facial expression.

"I missed you," he said. His voice was low. "I'm—sorry."

Hermione looked down to find Crow circling her ankle, his wide yellow lamp-eyes staring up at her with concern.

"I'm doing a little better," Hermione lied quietly. Then: "I wanted to ask you a favor."

"What is it?"

"Could you make sure nobody else at the safe house is hurt?" she whispered. "The one where your men found Ron. I don't want anyone else there to die."

Her voice cracked on the final word.

"No one was hurt," he said.

"Can you just check?" Hermione whispered. "Just—I want someone to make sure. I want you to make sure."

Malfoy, she knew, would have had a hard time rejecting this little plea even had she asked on a regular day. Let alone now. When there had been a door between them all night, when the words *I hate you* had fallen from her lips with the most force she'd ever mustered.

"Let me see your feet," he said. "Then I'll go."

He healed her injuries, then wrapped her feet in bandages and pinned them carefully in place. Her socks he discarded, then tugged a new pair in place for her.

"Thanks," Hermione muttered.

When Malfoy finally stepped into the Floo, it felt different than all the times he'd left her before. He was worried. He seemed agitated—a little frantic at the distance between them. As the green flames licked up his body, he met her eyes. They were dark with hunger, with misery. His irises flickered grey and green—and then he was gone.

Hermione sat in the dark for a while, just thinking. She'd already pieced together a decision, though it rattled painful and jagged in her mind.

When she finally stood, she made her way down the hall and into the wide, high-ceilinged foyer.

She came to a stop at the base of the curved marble staircase.

“Nott?” she called. “Nott. Are you there?”

Her mouth felt dry and sandy.

He appeared at the bannister only a few moments later. Hermione would not have been surprised to learn he’d been waiting patiently in his room for her to call for him.

Nott’s dark eyes were soft and hooded on her as he descended the staircase. His hands were in his pockets.

“I was sorry to hear the news,” he said, eyeing her.

“Not so sorry, I’m sure,” Hermione said. Her voice was hollow. “I’m ready to leave now. Tell Shacklebolt.”

Nott’s face showed no surprise. Just a glimmer of warmth in his eyes. Pleasure, perhaps, that she was no longer tied to Malfoy.

“He asked for you to say something only you would say,” Nott said. He crossed the few remaining steps between them, coming to a stop just a little too close to her. His hand lifted to her hair, almost absently. With the tip of one finger he stroked a curl.

“He worries I’m tricking him, I think,” Nott said. “He wants to make sure it’s really you.”

Was she still really herself? It didn’t feel like it.

“Tell him I didn’t speak for three weeks after Harry died,” Hermione said. “And that Ron called me heartless in front of the whole safe house for not crying. He was there, he’ll remember that.”

Hermione stared into the middle distance as she remembered the incident. She realized distantly after a moment that she was looking at a tapestry behind Nott. It showed a hunting scene. A fox, dying on the ground, defeated.

“Alright,” Nott said. “I’ll tell him.”

After a moment, Nott leaned slowly down. He kissed Hermione’s cheek, very lightly. When she didn’t react, he straightened up and walked back up the stairs.

Hermione returned to Malfoy’s room. Her feet ached. The cuts were all healed but the memory of the injury seemed to live on in her tissue.

She sank to a seat on the edge of the bed, feeling as stiff and hollow as a doll.

She sat, and she waited for the minutes to pass. Tick, tick, tick. The curse and blessing of her life—that things always passed. On and on time marched, bearing her like broken flotsam from the present to the future, from the punishing waves of today to the punishing waves of tomorrow. What else was there to do? Nothing at all.

Nothing at all.

## Chapter End Notes

💖 thank you for reading, it's an absolute joy writing this fic for you all. this chapter is a bit ouchie, I apologize ❤️

# Chapter 24

## Chapter Notes



CW and some notes at end

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Excelling during times of war required shutting down as many unnecessary emotions as possible. Malfoy had years of experience in this—he had always found it easier than most to quiet the noise of life, to focus on the work at hand.

Of course, he had never had to grapple with feelings quite like this before.

Hermione was upset. She had shoved him away from her, not once and not twice and not thrice but again and again.

She'd *screamed* when he touched her.

*I hate you.*

*I could never love you.*

Malfoy knew a lie when he saw one, and Hermione's pained face, her wet eyes, hadn't been honest. She didn't hate him, not truly. But it had still done something to him, to hear her say those things.

Malfoy had plenty of time to brood on this, as he made his way down the Cornwall coast. The Order outpost there was, of course, now abandoned following the Death Eater's attack and capture of Weasley. But Malfoy knew which Order members had resided there and which new temporary accommodations they had located themselves to in the aftermath. There had been no other casualties—he knew that. But he checked again, because Hermione had asked him to.

The night was dark and cold. The roar of the ocean was deafening, and from Malfoy's post near the cliffs he could see the tide slam against the jagged rock in a brutal rhythm. For some reason, it made Malfoy think of himself and his soldiers. Fighting on again and again, eking out edge after edge in what would soon be a decade-long war.

The moon was a pale white slice hanging over the black water, the only light in the darkness. And that made Malfoy think of Hermione.

How callous and stupid he had been, for not realizing just how extensive the fallout of Weasley's death would be. And now...

But, surely, it wasn't anything he couldn't fix?

Malfoy returned home. His skin and hair smelled of sea salt, and he licked the corner of his lips as he stepped out of his office Floo. It was empty. Hermione's tray of food was still untouched. The broken wood she'd made of her bookcase still littered the floor, but Malfoy saw—with a little pang of feeling—that she had at some point gathered up the torn pages of her books. They were stacked now in a ragged, sad little pile by the window.

He stared down at them for a bit, then looked up and out the open doors of his office. The house was very quiet. The silence was intolerable. It had been a long time, since the house had been quiet and still like this.

For a strange, cold moment Malfoy had the fear that Hermione had never lived here at all. That he had dreamed—fantasized—the entire thing.

He took long, slow steps through the house. His boots tapped against the marble tile, then went muffled on the carpet of the hall.

There was a light on in his room. But it wasn't until he saw Hermione with his own eyes did he exhale. She was sitting there by the window. Drawn tight into herself, her eyes big and dark when she looked up quickly at the sound of him.

He braced a few fingers surreptitiously against the doorframe, reeling from the relief of seeing her.

"Hello," he said quietly. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," she said, looking away. Her voice was hoarse.

Crow was asleep in her lap, and he blinked reproachfully at Malfoy. As though he suspected Malfoy was the reason behind Hermione's tears. Her eyes were pink and tender-looking; she must have cried all night.

And there was a certain numbness in her expression. Like she had checked out.

"Everyone else is safe," Malfoy said. "No other casualties. No serious injuries."

"That's good," she said after a moment. "I—that's good. Thank you for checking."

The distance between them felt so vast.

Malfoy experienced a little lurch of desperation, at the sense that she was drifting out of his reach. But he had been too forceful with her earlier. He would be gentle now; he would give her time.

He undressed and showered, keeping an eye the whole while through the fogged glass of the door to the slim, slumped figure of Hermione. Sitting on the edge of the bath, staring blankly

at nothing in particular. She'd followed him into the bathroom, seemingly just out of habit.

After he towed himself dry, Malfoy put on pajamas.

"Let me dress you for bed," he said.

Hermione didn't seem to hear him. Her eyes were dry now, like there were no more tears left. She lifted her arms obligingly when he removed her clothes, then held them up so he could easily slide her nightgown on over her shoulders.

This non-reaction—this distant, dissociated state—was more worrying than anything else she could have done.

Malfoy held her to his chest, there in the middle of his closet. He kissed her hair.

"I'm sorry," he said again. Trying to fix something he didn't quite understand.

She didn't answer.

Finally, he took her hand and led her to bed. Under the covers, he clung to her. She was soft and warm and sweet against his bare chest, and he remembered all too well how they had been only a day prior. She'd giggled, and smiled, and nuzzled into his ribs until he laughed too.

She'd called him by his name.

Malfoy let himself hold her too tightly. Maybe she would push him away in the morning. But it wasn't morning yet.

~

In Hermione's dream, Ron and Harry were both still alive. Everything was fine. The three of them were happy adults now, living and working in London, happy and safe. Things were as they ought to be—

She came awake with a sob. She was curled into a tight ball, and the pain of reality plunged like a dull knife into her chest.

"No," she whimpered, covering her face. "No, no..."

Malfoy reached for her. And for just one moment, Hermione sank into his embrace. She cried into his shirt.

Then, as the fog of sleep dissipated fully, she recoiled.

"Sweetheart," came Malfoy's hoarse voice. "Come back. You're crying; let me hold you."

"Let go of me," she rasped.

He did.

She got out of bed—it was barely dawn. She heard Malfoy sit up behind her, keeping a wary eye on her as she paced to the window and stood facing the white winter outside, one hand pressed to her mouth to stop herself from sobbing.

She wished she was dead instead of them. It was what she deserved.

At least she would be out of here soon. Back where she belonged, back where she could numb herself with the work she knew she should have never allowed herself to be taken from. Healing the soldiers, making the ointments, crafting the spells—

She would do it until her hands bled. Until they buried her in the dirt.

Malfoy had stood at some point and was behind her now. He seemed to be battling with himself, trying to determine how or whether to touch her. Out of the corner of her eye she watched his hand lift, then stay, then drop.

"I'm sorry," he breathed.

She ignored him.

"Hermione," he said. "Please—look at me."

Hermione let out a choked sob. The worst part was just how badly she *did* want to look at him. To seek the comfort he would undoubtedly give.

"Okay," she said, suddenly filled with quiet rage. She wheeled on him. "Okay. I'm looking at you. You can make me do whatever you want. Right? Here I am, looking."

She needed, suddenly, to believe this was only his fault. That she'd fought him every step of the way—that she'd never kissed him—

"Go on, then," she said, wiping in a constant, desperate motion at the freely falling tears on her cheeks. "Go on. Order me to forgive you. That's what you want isn't it?"

She hated herself, she hated herself—

"Order me!" she screamed, and Malfoy watched her, his jaw locking. "It's all perfectly under your control, isn't it? The war is just your job, and I'm here. It's all meant to be separate. How careless of me to find out, and ruin everything. Is it intruding—"

She covered her face, then threw her hands down again. She felt like she was finally collapsing, imploding, under the impossible circumstances of life.

"Is it intruding—" Hermione sobbed, shoving his chest, a motion that devolved into recklessly striking at him. "On your ability to *play house*?"

Malfoy held still, letting her pummel at him. She wanted him to punish her. And when he didn't, Hermione started scratching her own face. That's when Malfoy seized her wrists.

He took three long strides forward, making Hermione stumble back to make room for him, until her thighs hit the chair and she fell back into the seat.

She wrenched at his hold but he didn't let go. He held her gaze, leaning over her, keeping her in the chair.

Her nails had left lines on her cheeks and they stung viciously now, with the salt of her tears running down them. Malfoy lifted a finger to touch one, his eyes immeasurably soft. His face looked the most pained she had ever seen it.

"You have no idea," Malfoy breathed hoarsely, moving his gaze to hers. "How I want things to be."

For a moment she had the most insane worry that he might yell at her. He looked so taut with pent energy.

But then he did something even more unthinkable.

Malfoy kneeled.

He dropped down at her feet, like he was praying. He rested his forehead on her knee, he clung to her leg with his hand.

"I love you," he whispered. "If I could make the world better I would. If I could *be* better I would. If you believe nothing else, at least believe that."

He kissed her knee. He brought her leg up, and kissed her foot.

"I'll lick your wounds," he said. "Even when you hate me."

Hermione's whole body seemed to vibrate with tension. For a moment she wasn't sure if she would faint, or possibly scream.

But then she dissolved instead.

Into hiccuping sobs, into gasping, shuddering cries. She covered her face, humiliated by her reaction. And when Malfoy stood, when he opened his arms, she clung to him. An automatic reaction. But she let herself do it, gave herself a brief respite from the burning torrent of self-loathing.

She took bitter solace in the knowledge that she had, at least, committed to Nott's offer before she'd had time to second guess herself.

"Breakfast?" Malfoy asked softly, a long while later. "You should eat something."

"I'm not hungry," she said.

But when he summoned a new meal tray for her (bacon, toast, eggs scrambled with vegetables) she sat up at his insistence and let him feed her.

“It’s going to be alright, darling,” he said softly. “I’ll take care of you. Poor thing.”

Afterwards, they stayed in the bedroom and Malfoy remained by her side, reading a novel in bed. He was clearly concerned for her wellbeing, and at multiple points he lay a hand on her hip, as though reassuring himself she was still there. She remained curled next to him, her eyes still swollen and tender.

All in all, it promised to be a slow, quiet day.

Hermione should have known, though, that the quiet days were over.

It was barely noon when, with a loud cracking noise that made Hermione jump, a house elf appeared in the room. It was the first time she had ever seen someone enter Malfoy’s room unannounced.

Malfoy got to his feet.

“Master,” the elf squeaked. She was frazzled, frantic—she wore a chunky knit jumper that hung over her knobbly knees and that flailed around as she jumped with urgency. “Master! A message from the Minister!”

“Let it in,” Malfoy said.

The house elf flailed one long-fingered hand and a shadowy white owl swooped through the window and landed at Malfoy’s feet.

The sentry messenger tipped its head back and, in the unmistakable voice of Minister Umbridge, a harried message burst forth.

“General!” came her cracked, urgent exclamation. “There are Order operatives *at the Ministry*. They’re here, Malfoy! Out in plain daylight! They’ve bombed the Atrium—the Aurors department is locked down, nobody knows how they did it—and—“

In the background, a huge crashing sound, like a wall of windows shattering. Umbridge screamed furiously. The messenger sentry remained entirely still as it spewed the full audio of the whole message, and the effect was intensely eerie.

“Just send some Death Eaters!” Umbridge’s voice spat. “Send someone—what do we pay you for? At least one official is *dead*, General—“

“Enough,” Malfoy commanded, sounding furious. The messenger sentry closed its beak and the message was cut short. “Nimky, send the sentry to Dolohov, Mulciber and Macnair. Have them bring a dozen soldiers apiece.”

And all at once, Hermione realized what this was. What it had to be.

Nott and Shacklebolt had manufactured their distraction.

Malfoy looked at Hermione now. Hesitating—unsure if he should go.

“It’s fine,” she said. Her voice was shaking and she tried to steady it. She hadn’t expected everything to happen this quickly.

“It’s fine,” she forced herself to repeat, ignoring the pounding of her heart in her ears. “You should go. I’ll be okay.”

Malfoy looked at her, as though trying to decide whether she would really be fine. Hermione forced a small smile.

“Just,” she said quietly. “Just be back before dinner.”

Malfoy nodded, soothed by the prospect of promising her a speedy return.

He swooped low to kiss her cheek, and his hand came to rest possessively—lovingly—on the curve of her waist.

He pressed his forehead to hers.

“Don’t skip lunch,” he said. “Okay? Promise.”

A hairline fissure seemed to crack clean through Hermione’s heart.

“I promise,” she whispered, hoping her voice sounded normal.

“Have our people barricade off the entire Ministry,” Malfoy said to the elf, his voice cold and calm. Unflappable he was, when it came to the normal tidings of war. “Find out how many Order members are there.”

Cloak on, mask in hand. Malfoy kissed Hermione’s cheek again.

“I love you.”

Then he left the room, the house elf still following. And a few moments later there was the distant whoosh of the Floo in the living room.

He was gone.

Hermione closed her eyes.

She let herself hypothesize—hope—that she’d been mistaken. Maybe it really *was* too soon, and this Ministry bombing was only a coincidence.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Seconds passed and Hermione counted each one. A traitorous sense of relief built in her.

Tick. Tick.

All was quiet.

Hermione exhaled—and then there was a scream from upstairs.

Pansy was yelling. It was hard to make out the words—Hermione rushed out the door and into the living room, to the foot of the stairs—there were no sounds of *men* yelling though, only Pansy—

“What are you *thinking?*” Pansy shrieked to Nott.

Nott was coming down the stairs, taking them two at a time, his expression intent and a little haggard. He spotted Hermione.

“Let’s go,” he said curtly to her, breathing a little hard. “Come on. Fast.”

“You fucking idiot,” Pansy yelled, leaning over the bannister. “He’s going to kill you. You fucking *idiot*—“

“Let’s go!” Nott roared to Hermione, who was staring white-faced up at Pansy.

“Maybe she’s right—“ she said hoarsely to Nott, but then he was dragging her by the hand away.

To Malfoy’s office.

Was it only Hermione’s imagination, or were the wards buzzing? Did the house seem to know, through its densely knotted web of ancient magic, that there was blood in the water?

“Come on,” Nott said, still breathing hard. He ran a shaking hand through his hair and Hermione was suddenly wracked with terror. Why was Nott so out of control?

“What’s happening?” she asked. “Why are you afraid?”

Nott shook his head, ignoring her.

“Let me see your collar,” he said.

Hermione hesitated.

“Come on,” he shouted. “We haven’t got much time. Pansy was right—he’ll kill us if he comes back before you’re gone.”

*No, Hermione couldn’t help but think. He would only kill you.*

But it was this very thought that made her force herself to commit to the escape. She tipped her head up, showing Nott the collar.

She assumed he would cut it off her. But he only pulled out his wand and waved it—the tip of the wand shaking, his whole body shaking—over the signet ring.

A burst of cool magic. Then a light shimmer of blue.

Nott exhaled, and for the first time he looked relieved.

“Good,” he muttered to himself. “Good, that’s good.”

“What?” Hermione asked, touching the necklace.

“Malfoy isn’t the only one who has some control over these wards,” Nott said, fumbling in his pocket for something. He produced a pouch of Floo powder.

“*You* can control the wards?” Hermione asked, floored.

“No,” Nott said, emptying the bag of emerald powder into the hearth. “No—only the Master and Mistress of the house can. And *you’re* wearing what used to be Narcissa’s ring.”

“He would never give me the power to operate the wards,” Hermione said. “He knows I’d have tried to escape—“

She stopped just short of saying *in the beginning*.

The hearth started to crack and fail, a fire attempting without success to start. Shacklebolt was trying to make the Floos connect, but the wards—as Hermione had seen them do before—quelled the flame each time.

“He wouldn’t have had to worry,” Nott said briskly. “Not unless you had a wand.”

And Nott tossed her his own.

Hermione caught it. She stared down; the slim piece of wood looked so foreign and out of place in her hands. But even as she clutched it in her fist, she felt the warmth of the magic seep outwards into her skin. Flowing into her—she was a witch, and she had a wand again.

And then—with a deep, quiet vibration, so soft Hermione wasn’t sure she hadn’t imagined it—she felt Malfoy’s magic thrum too. Through the ring, vibrating through her chest. Aware that something had happened.

“What do I do?” She asked Nott, panicked. “I think he knows we’re—I think he’s going to come back soon.”

“We have time,” Nott said, though his face went bloodless at her words. “He won’t come yet. They’re occupying him at the Ministry—that was the plan.”

Hermione looked into the cracking, sputtering green fire.

“How do I ignite it?” she asked Nott.

“You just say the normal spell. *Incendio*. But listen—“ he took a step forward, looking stressed. “As soon as you light the fire, Draco *will* know. He’ll be able to sense that for certain. So you’ve got to do the next steps immediately after.”

He moved towards the fire, pointing into the hearth.

“When the fire ignites, you’re going to see Shacklebolt. As soon as you see him, you need to come close—as close as you can—and say: *Intrare*. You understand? Usually the master of the house would be wearing the ring on their hand, and they’d press their palm to the top of the fireplace or something. But you’ve got it on your neck, so you’re going to just need to come as close as you can.”

“How sure are you this is going to work?” Hermione asked, unable to keep the horror from her face.

“It’ll work,” Nott said with more confidence than Hermione suspected he really had.

There was a sound from upstairs—it sounded like Pansy was moving furniture. Nott looked up, but when there was no other sound he returned his gaze to Hermione.

“Don’t worry about her,” he said, reading Hermione’s mind. “She’s probably hiding the fucking diamonds. She won’t call Draco.”

He swallowed and loosened the top button of his shirt. There was sweat visible, glistening on the line of his throat.

The fire cracked again and again in front of them. Flashing green, then dark. Green, then dark.

“Alright,” Nott said. “Let’s go. Come on.”

The wand in Hermione’s hand was slippery now, with the sweat of her palms.

Soon she would be back at the safe house.

What would happen, if she told Nott that she changed her mind? She could drop the wand. She could turn back, turn around—

“*Incendio*,” she forced out.

The fire burst into life.

This time, Hermione knew she did not imagine the ripple in the wards.

“Okay,” Nott said. “Hermione—fast now—come on—”

She could see in the fire the heat wave-distorted silhouette of Shacklebolt.

“Hermione?” he yelled out. “That you?”

“Yes! Yes, Kingsley, it’s me,” Hermione said at once.

“Nott pulled it off after all, did he? Let’s get you out of there. The wards—”

Hermione’s mouth was very dry. She looked at Nott, then at the silhouette of Shacklebolt. She felt inexplicably frozen.

“Hermione!” Nott roared. “Now!”

Hermione stepped forward to the fire. As close as she possibly could. She craned her neck forward, so the signet ring all but touched the stone at the top of the fireplace.

Then, holding Nott’s wand so tightly that she was worried it would snap, she said:

“*Intrare.*”

The pulsing of Malfoy’s signet ring—now turning hot, the metal almost burning—reached fever pitch. But Hermione knew now that it was too late. Malfoy wouldn’t make it here in time; she would be gone in just seconds.

The wards were releasing, and the blurred silhouette of Shacklebolt grew sharper and sharper. Then a black boot emerged from the flames.

Shacklebolt stepped into the office with a spray of ash and ember; he coughed hard, waving the dust away.

He looked a little thinner but otherwise exactly—almost shockingly—just as Hermione remembered. Hermione didn’t want to think about how her appearance must seem to him.

But if Shacklebolt took note of her clean clothes, her shiny hair, he said nothing. He gave Hermione a thin smile.

“It’s over,” he said to her. “Now’s the time.”

Hermione nodded mutely. She turned to Nott.

“Are you coming with us?” she asked. Malfoy would kill him if he stayed.

But Nott looked to Shacklebolt, as though for guidance on how to answer. He took his wand back from Hermione without speaking.

“He’ll be just fine,” Shacklebolt soothed.

Kingsley seemed oddly calm. He wasn’t moving fast, he wasn’t in a rush. A bad feeling started to take root in the pit of Hermione’s stomach.

“Let’s go?” Hermione asked, her eyes darting to the fire. She started to gather the hem of her long nightgown, preparing to step through the roaring green flames.

But Shacklebolt only shook his head, an expression of mingled pity and disgust on his face.

With one lazy gesture, he pushed her away from the fire, so hard that she staggered.

He smiled at her then, thin and cold-blooded. She had never seen that expression on him before.

Shacklebolt’s skin rippled.

His features distorted like melting wax running down a candle; he stretched his neck back—lazy, almost cat-like—and when he faced Hermione again he was a new man.

“No,” she breathed.

Antonin Dolohov extinguished the Floo fire with a careless kick of his boot.

“Let’s stay a while longer, love,” he said “Party’s only starting.”

## Chapter End Notes

CW: Grief, brief moments where Hermione wishes she weren't alive.

<3

# Chapter 25

## Chapter Notes

CW at end

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Hermione took a step back, nearly stumbling in her effort to put distance between her and Dolohov. Then she turned and ran. But Nott seized her by the arm.

“I’m sorry,” he said, genuinely sounding it. His nervousness took on a terrifying new context now. He had worked with Dolohov to trap her like this—so why did he seem a little unsure of what Dolohov would do? “But it’s for the best. Malfoy was going to fall, sooner or later. Better that someone effective took his place.”

Hermione surprised herself, then. She swung her elbow hard, up and back, and felt it connect with a crunching *crack* with Nott’s nose. He howled and let go of her. Hermione tore his wand from his grip and held it out before her. Her first time using a wand as a weapon in this house.

Dolohov laughed. Hermione wondered now how she could have never noticed the cruel contours of his face, so easily masked behind his charming smile.

“You think I’ll play nice?” Dolohov asked her. “Just because daddy always does? *Crucio*. ”

Hermione screamed, crumpling to the floor as the torture curse knocked through her like a bludgeoning mace. She sobbed, her fingers grappling futilely at the wand, trying to clutch it close to her chest.

“He’s not here to protect you,” Dolohov taunted, and she could hear the wide, cat-like smile in his voice. “*Crucio!* ”

The whole house seemed to be vibrating with panic now, as though aware that one of its own was being attacked. Malfoy’s signet ring vibrated most of all, buzzing like a caught snitch at her throat. Hermione scrambled with convulsing fingers, trying to hold the ring, trying to seize it quickly before Dolohov caught wind of what she was doing.

*I could Apparate to you from the fourth ring of hell*, Malfoy had once said.

Hermione’s fingers gripped the circle of metal and she squeezed.

She had often wondered, over the past months, what would happen when she did. Now she knew.

A shockwave of magic pulsed outwards from her tightly clasped fingers. The effect was almost nauseating in its strength and impact. Hermione's ears rang with the energy of it.

Dolohov looked neither surprised nor afraid.

"Very good," he said quietly. "He should be along any moment now."

He looked at her like she was nothing but a bug on the floor before him. Something small and tiresome that should be crushed.

He strode to her, then bent down and seized her neck. For a moment Hermione thought he was strangling her. Then she realized he was gripping the chain around her throat.

Dolohov tugged forcefully but the chain didn't break—Hermione was dragged painfully forward.

"Stubborn bit of jewelry, isn't it?" Dolohov asked, tightening his hold. "But don't worry. I've taken two other rings this evening, and I find it gets easier every time."

With a final tug—a sharp, broken vibration of the signet ring, an almost scream-like high pitched noise—the silver chain snapped. Hermione fell forward to the floor, her neck now cold and bare.

Dolohov seemed entirely unthreatened by her—and Hermione tried to use this to her advantage.

"*Confringo*," she choked out, pointing Nott's wand at Dolohov. He easily brushed aside the spell, then leaned down over her.

"Know your place," he hissed at her, spitting on the ground next to her.

Dolohov straightened up, then lowered his boot sharply onto her hand. Hermione screamed as she felt her fingers crumple, at least one of them breaking. Nott's wand, still in her fist, was broken in two.

Dolohov then raised his own wand to Nott and sent the man flying against the wall. His head hit the stone with a crack, and Nott slumped to the floor, unconscious or dead.

"A stupid boy," Dolohov said to Hermione conversationally, looking at Nott's still body. "Thousands of years of history to learn from. Yet traitors never seem to realize their value has a short shelf life."

Hermione sobbed quietly, trying not to move her broken hand.

Against the backdrop of all the horror, all the adrenaline, she now became aware of a sort of ringing throughout the air.

Dolohov looked up.

"Here he comes," he whispered.

There was a slight note of apprehension in Dolohov's voice. His hand flexed around his wand.

And then Malfoy arrived.

The very air seemed to shriek with the force of his Apparition. He tore through space, and when at last he materialized the magic around him appeared nearly blackened—particulate like ash, granular like broken atoms—with the heat of his rage.

His mouth was open in an inhuman snarl. His gaze was unlike Hermione had ever seen it—he looked around the room in jerky, wolf-like searching motions, and it took him hardly any time at all to find Hermione.

He wheeled on Dolohov.

“*Avada Kedavra*,” he roared, and a twist of bright green light hurtled towards Dolohov.

Dolohov's face was no longer smug with assured victory. With a furious Malfoy in the room with him, all trace of mockery or amusement left his black eyes.

The killing curse was redirected into a wall, in a defensive move that looked like it took nearly all of Dolohov's strength. He staggered from the force of it. But—soldier that he was—Hermione could see he had anticipated for these to be the opening moves.

“Better be careful!” Dolohov yelled out to Malfoy. Hermione felt a levitation spell seize her, and she was dangling in the air right in front of Dolohov. She kicked out futilely, clawing with her unbroken hand at her neck, where the force of Dolohov's magic held her up like a punishing fist around her jugular. “Wouldn't want anything to happen to your *pet*, would you?”

“This is a fight between us two,” spat Malfoy. But Hermione saw a quicksilver flash of fear in his cold eyes. The first time she'd seen it in him. “Leave her to the side and face me like a man.”

“And not make use of a liability you've so conveniently taken on?” Dolohov asked with a barking laugh. “I think not, General. I killed your mother and aunt before coming here. One and two in command down—and I'll be damned if I leave the third to chance.”

Dolohov tossed something onto the ground between himself and Malfoy. Hermione saw the objects catch the light. It was three signet rings—the last one with a chain still running limply through it. They fell with a hollow clatter. Malfoy didn't spare them a look. The levitation spell around Hermione's throat hoisted her higher and she choked.

“Yes. I like the odds better with your girl in my hands,” Dolohov hissed. “Let's hear her sing, shall we?”

Malfoy's eyes widened.

“Don't,” he snarled, but Dolohov had already spoken the *Crucio*.

Hermione could no longer even hear herself scream. It all bled together in her ears. But she did hear—with distinct, crystal clarity—the sound of Malfoy yelling out. Like her pain was his own.

The pain went on and on, and when finally it passed, Hermione hung limply from where Dolohov's magic still held her up. Like a broken doll. She shuddered and opened her eyes to find Malfoy staring at her, his face white and eyes burning.

She wished she could tell him she was sorry. That he ought to do whatever he had to in order to kill Dolohov, and that she didn't care if she had to die in the process.

Dolohov laughed—he seemed intoxicated by the sight of the usually unshakable Malfoy, now rendered desperate. He lifted Hermione higher. Malfoy's head followed her and he made a sound of agony.

"Humiliating," Dolohov said. "All that power—and for what? You're a neutered animal, Malfoy, when your girl is on the line."

Hermione could almost *hear* Malfoy thinking, so close had they become in the last few months. She knew—and despaired—that Malfoy would rather die than throw a lethal curse at Dolohov with her in the line of fire. So when she heard his magic crackling, she had no guesses as to what he had planned.

Malfoy—with the rabid, wild-eyed desperation of a cornered animal—sent a series of massive curses right into the floor. The entire house shook; plaster fell from the ceiling, getting in Hermione's eyes, clouding the room like smoke. She heard wood and stone shattering, heard the very foundation of the house shrieking in protest.

And then the floor gave out, and they were falling.

Hermione felt a buffeting push of magic—Malfoy's—attempt to shove her out of the room and to the side, so she would remain up here instead of falling with him and Dolohov. But Dolohov summoned her to him, seizing hold of her wrist, and dragged her down.

Hermione's head hit stone with a crack. They were in the dungeons.

The noise Malfoy made when he saw that she had come down with them was like the roar of a wounded tiger.

"Go!" he yelled hoarsely to Hermione. "Go—let her go—"

"Let's start by draining some of that famous Malfoy power, shall we?" Dolohov jeered. His eyes popped out of his head, he looked mad. "A classic *Crucio*—but I'll give you the choice, who should bear it, you or the girl?"

Malfoy snarled at Dolohov. Wordless, his eyes narrowed with hate, blood from a cut on his jaw running down his neck.

"That's what I thought," Dolohov said quietly. He pointed his wand at Malfoy. "*Crucio*."

The curse landed on Malfoy and he went rigid. Hermione sobbed at the sight of him bearing the pain. She was in a crumpled heap on the floor, her wrist still clutched in Dolohov's angry grip, but still she tried to crawl towards Malfoy.

Malfoy bore the torture without sound. His jaw was as tight as a steel trap, the tendons stark and corded. And his eyes—furious, bright—never left Dolohov's.

When the spell passed, Malfoy slumped forward to spit blood.

“It could have been her dirty blood on the ground instead,” Dolohov said. “But you chose to spill yours.”

“I’m going to kill you,” Malfoy breathed, looking up. Blood ran down his chin and his voice was eerily calm. “I’m going to *kill you*.”

Dolohov responded with another *Crucio*.

This one lasted much longer. When it relented, Malfoy vomited blood.

Hermione sobbed. She tried again to crawl towards Malfoy. Dolohov let go of her wrist but kicked her in the ribs.

“Stay down,” he said, with mock gentle discipline. “Like a good dog.”

Then, to Malfoy:

“Let’s make it a bit more interesting, shall we? I think we ought to remove a limb. Yours or the girl’s? I’ll even let you pick—leg or arm.”

Malfoy only bared his teeth at Dolohov.

And Hermione realized that she was going to be the reason Malfoy died.

She was Dolohov’s leverage. She was his only advantage over a wizard he would ordinarily never have been able to defeat.

She was like a weight tied to Malfoy’s ankle—the anchor that was going to drown him.

Hermione was still holding one broken half of Nott’s wand. Two of her fingers were crumpled and useless, but the remaining ones had convulsed tightly into a fist, keeping the broken wood in her grasp.

So fixated was Dolohov on the sight of Malfoy on the ground that he barely noticed when Hermione rose from her prone position into a crouch. She summoned all the energy she could, then lunged at Dolohov. She tackled him and plunged the fractured wand half like a dagger into Dolohov’s thigh.

It made contact; the sharp end of the wood broke through fabric and skin and flesh; he let out a roar of pain.

Dolohov kicked her in the face; his boot connected with Hermione's jaw with a sickening crack and she flew backwards—but in this narrow opening of opportunity Malfoy stood and sent up a torrent of curses.

Some made contact with Dolohov, but he rallied and managed to shield himself from the rest. The ones that had broken through the shield split his skin—all over his face and the exposed skin of his neck.

He hurled an explosion curse at Malfoy, then bent over to pull the bloodied wand out of his leg.

But Malfoy was on his feet now, albeit bloody and injured. And Dolohov looked warier and more angry than he had thus far.

Hermione crawled away from them, knowing instinctively that Dolohov's next move would be to try to wrangle her back into his control. Back where she could serve as Malfoy's kryptonite.

She was right. Dolohov attempted to levitate her once more—but Malfoy predicted the move. There was an eardrum-shattering noise—like a rockfall, or a hailstorm. The golden threads of the house—the security wards, interwoven through every brick and beam—had torn themselves out of the walls and floor. They peeled off the stone and up out of the foundation and coiled mid-air around Dolohov. Then, all at once, they shot towards him. The gleaming lights braided together and joined into a sharp point, hurtling at his heart.

It took all Dolohov's focus and strength to shield himself. The wards hit the shielding spell with a reverberating *gong*.

Hermione used these precious seconds to crawl out of the way, further from him.

She saw Malfoy look at her. She knew what he was going to do right before he did it, and she screamed at him not to.

Malfoy tried to cast a protection spell at her. But this half-second was all Dolohov needed to attack him once more.

Hermione didn't know what the spell was—it wasn't *Crucio*. Whatever it was entered Malfoy's abdomen. Hermione could see the spray of blood, the way his weight buckled on the left side first as he hit the floor with a sickening thud. Blood poured from his side, pooling in an inky puddle around his body.

Dolohov's eyes didn't leave Malfoy. He wouldn't make the mistake of taking his attention off him again.

"You don't deserve the power you have," Dolohov spat. And there was true, cold rage in his voice now. A level of emotion that attested to years of frustration, of jealousy. "Do you know what the definition of *privilege* is, Draco?"

He cast another curse at Malfoy, who had been trying to get up. He fell once more, and Hermione sobbed.

“The definition of privilege is having the entire world at your feet,” Dolohov hissed. “And *still* going out of your way to pick up a weakness. Your mother was just the same—with her pathetic obsession over her dead husband. It’s a defect in your bloodline, I think. But no matter. *I* am the winner in the end. *I, who wanted it more!*”

Before this final sentence was out, the golden wards of the house spun up again—whip-like, with all the speed of a scorpion’s tail. They snapped at Dolohov, who was forced to leap to the side and shield himself.

Malfoy got to his feet.

“If I knew you would talk this fucking much,” Malfoy sneered, staggering. “Then I would have tried dying at the first *Crucio*. ”

Dolohov’s wand was raised, and Malfoy—who ordinarily didn’t use his wand—had his in his hand as well.

This would be a true duel.

Malfoy circled the room counterclockwise, pacing away from Hermione, directing the line of fire away from her. The blood falling from him was so copious that it left a smeared trail of footsteps where he stepped, arching around the room like the trajectory of a clock’s hands. Each step another moment of time, leaving its bloody mark in history.

“I made the mistake of thinking you had any sort of spine,” Malfoy said. “I saved your life in Paris. I set you up with more power than anyone of your skill could ever possibly attain. But you’re a parasite aren’t you? Eyes bigger than your fucking stomach.”

The tendons popped in Dolohov’s neck, his fist shook, the wand in it sparking with furious, unspoken curses. He was fueled with loathing, fed off of it.

“I would have made it without you,” Dolohov hissed. “You arrogant bastard. I owe you nothing—“

Hermione had taken refuge behind a large chunk of fallen stone, and she breathed raggedly. There was no one here who could save her. How would she get out of this? How would Malfoy?

Something nudged Hermione’s hand.

She looked up to find Crow there, blinking up at her. He pawed playfully at her fingers.

“No,” she whispered, horrified. “Crow—get out of here.”

But Crow seemed unaware of the extreme danger he was in. He dropped something on the ground—he had brought Hermione a present. The glimmering chain of her necklace, with the

signet ring hanging heavy in the center of it. He thought, perhaps, that this was all a game. He was just bringing her a new shiny object, as he sometimes did...

“Go,” Hermione hissed at Crow.

She heard Dolohov land a spell at Malfoy then, and the ensuing grunt of pain. Crow looked up at once, alerted by the sound.

The black kitten mewled in reproach. Who would dare hurt his daddy?

Ignoring Hermione, Crow rounded the side of the fallen rubble and started running lightly towards Dolohov.

“No,” Hermione moaned.

She tried to catch him but her fingers closed only around air.

Malfoy’s eyes widened at Crow’s approach. Dolohov hadn’t yet seen the cat.

In a clear attempt at distracting him, Malfoy sent a shower of broken stone falling from the roof.

But it was no use.

Dolohov knocked aside the stones like they were raindrops. And then he spotted Crow.

With a malicious laugh, Dolohov fired a burst of white-silver light at Crow. Overpowerful, blinding bright—far stronger than it needed to be, to hurt such a soft, small animal.

The spell clipped Crow on the side, and he flew backwards and hit the wall. He didn’t get up.

Hermione screamed.

The room seemed temporarily devoid of air. She couldn’t hear anything, only a dull ringing. Malfoy and Dolohov circled each other still, the duel unfinished, but she felt, somehow, as though whatever meager fire was in her had been extinguished at the sight of Crow hitting that wall.

How strange it is, sometimes—the things that end up breaking us after years of survived suffering.

Everything else happened in quick succession. Malfoy was visibly shaken by Hermione’s scream. He had been about to attack Dolohov but had hesitated at the final moment, his attention split. Dolohov used the opportunity to hurl a series of spells at him.

Malfoy blocked the first. The second and third hit him in the chest. The fabric of his robes immediately bloomed with blood.

He staggered back—Malfoy lifted his wand to retaliate but once again Dolohov was faster. A shattering sound as the bones in Malfoy’s left arm were crushed. He fell to the ground and

when Dolohov hurled three more curses at him, Malfoy only groaned.

Next to Hermione, something started to vibrate against the stone floor.

She opened her eyes, though she was sobbing so hard that she didn't trust her vision. The buzzing was coming from the ring. The necklace was still just where Crow had dropped it, and it was glowing faintly.

*"It's a kind of Portkey,"* Malfoy had said, all those weeks ago. *"It will activate if I die, and take you away from here."*

The ring buzzed with increasing force. It was waking up. Preparing to do its one job.

It knew Malfoy was near death.

Hermione rose to her feet, the buzzing necklace in her hand. Her vision was spotty—every bone in her body ached and screamed in protest as she started running. She didn't know what she planned—only that she wouldn't let the last thing she saw in this house be Dolohov murdering Malfoy in cold blood.

He didn't hear her coming, no doubt distracted by his imminent victory. Malfoy's death—how long must he have waited, to kill him.

Hermione picked up speed.

Malfoy's head lifted at the sound of her pounding feet. The blond strands on one side of his head were soaked and black with blood. His eyes—mottled and purpled—widened with shock.

The pain in his face at that moment—at the sight of Hermione running towards instead of away from the danger—was unrivaled by anything Dolohov had done to him.

"No," he said. He tried to stand, but Dolohov knocked him back down. Malfoy shook his head. "NO!"

Hermione leapt onto Dolohov's back, the Malfoy chain in her two fists.

She threw it over his head and drew the chain tight as a wire over Dolohov's throat.

Dolohov stumbled forward in shock, felt for the object choking into his windpipe, clawed at it automatically for a few moments as he struggled to breathe.

But then he seemed to realize it was only Hermione on his back. His alarm turned into vicious amusement. Delighted, no doubt, that he could kill Hermione in front of Malfoy as a final act of torture.

Ignoring the metal chain at his neck, Dolohov instead seized Hermione's arm and dragged her forward, attempting to throw her over his shoulder and onto the ground.

He was going to tear her arm out of its socket. He was going to smash her face in with his boot—

Hermione didn't care.

Every time she blinked she saw a different dead Order member on the inside of her eyelids, a different dead friend lifeless on the ground. There was nothing worth living for anyway. The only thing she wanted to do was pull the chain so tight that it broke Dolohov's skin. To cut through his flesh, his bone, his jugular—she wanted the very last thing she ever did to be hurting Dolohov, even if he killed her after.

Dolohov got very close to throwing Hermione forward but she kicked out with one leg to regain balance, full of strength she'd forgotten she possessed.

He pointed his wand backwards, trying to direct it at her—but Hermione bit his neck and threw her elbow into the crook of his arm.

And—unbelievably, unbelievably—his wand fell to the floor with a clatter.

Dolohov yelled out with rage.

Hermione wouldn't be able to hang on for much longer.

Malfoy rose to his feet.

His eyebrows drew together in a snarl of fury, his teeth bared, his face more demon than human. He swayed unsteadily, but his gaze didn't waver. He took in the sight of Hermione on Dolohov's back—and the signet ring. The chain.

Malfoy extended his hand, palm out. A glowing twist of yellow magic formed between his fingers, and at once the chain around Dolohov's throat began to vibrate with great force. It was impossible to keep ahold of it—Hermione let go, dropping to the floor. She crawled away as Dolohov continued to claw at his neck, where the chain remained, glowing burning yellow.

The light in Malfoy's hand grew brighter and brighter—and so did the chain around Dolohov's neck. Malfoy's face was illuminated by horrible light, his expression a mask of rage.

A grotesque sizzling sound started to come from Dolohov, where the metal met skin. White-grey smoke bloomed in puffs around his face as his flesh burned.

Dolohov screamed and clawed at his throat.

Then the necklace abruptly stopped vibrating. Whatever potential energy it had been accruing was ready to turn into force. The room was suddenly entirely silent, Dolohov's screams having turned hoarse and silent, trapped of air.

Malfoy crushed his hand into a fist.

The chain around Dolohov's neck snapped inwards with a horrible and final crunch.

There was the sound of bone being cut, the sound of wet flesh falling apart. And then Dolohov's severed head fell clean off his body.

### Chapter End Notes

Violence. If you've come this far, I doubt that will be enough to deter you--but just FYI it gets a bit gnarly. Animal gets hurt. :(

<3

It's dark, it'll get better. Don't worry, I got u

# Chapter 26

## Chapter Notes

CW at end

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Malfoy's body felt simultaneously drained of blood and also far too heavy for his skeleton to carry. The room swam before his eyes.

Old habit—a soldier's need for triple assurance, of the assumption that danger was never quite averted—made him want to confirm that Dolohov was really dead. He staggered to the body. Blood was pooling beneath it and Dolohov's eyes were open but empty. A blood vessel had burst in one of them. Gone was the man Malfoy had once considered his closest friend.

Malfoy moved on. He directed his attention immediately to Hermione, who was shivering on the floor. Her face was as white as the chalky stone dust that fell all around, and she was staring in horror at Dolohov's head.

Malfoy stepped between her and it, obscuring her view.

"Sweetheart?" he asked, lowering himself into a crouch. "It's okay. Look at me."

One of her hands was twisted; there was blood on her head and face, spots of it had fallen onto her nightgown. Malfoy touched her, resting his palm on her back. He needed to feel her, warm and safe and alive.

"I killed him," she whispered, looking up at Malfoy.

"It's okay," Malfoy said. "It's over now. Come on—let's get you out of here..."

But when he looped Hermione's arm around his shoulder, she was limp. Her skin was clammy. She was in shock.

Malfoy didn't want to move her by force yet. And there were two sharp points of pain in his side that indicated broken ribs. His mouth still tasted of blood. He sank into a seated position by Hermione's side.

All around them was the smashed landscape of his home. Destroyed stone walls, splintered wood beams. The occasional large, bulky outlines of furniture that had fallen from above floors when the ceiling gave out. Their shapes were blurred by the chalky fall of stone dust, still slowly settling.

The room was silent. But Malfoy could still hear the echo of Hermione's screams. He would never forget the way she sounded, dangling there as Dolohov tortured her.

Why hadn't he been more paranoid? Had he grown so soft, so distractible? He should have realized how irresistible the opportunity for a coup must have seemed to Dolohov. Narcissa and Bellatrix had been growing old, less sane by the day. The only other piece was Malfoy. Malfoy—who had foolishly forgotten that betrayal was a knife most deftly wielded by one's closest ally.

Malfoy was so tired of guarding power. He felt, more and more, that there might be better things worth protecting.

Hermione's breathing was shallow and uneven. Malfoy let his fingers curl into the soft, dirty fabric of her nightgown. She was entirely motionless but for the rise and fall of her back with each breath; Malfoy might have thought her in a fitful sleep, had her eyes not been still open. Wide and haunted. He had seen shock like this before, in his soldiers.

"Hermione?" he said softly. "Can you say something for me, darling?"

"His eyes are following me."

Malfoy smoothed his hand over Hermione's curls, trying to comfort her. He didn't know what to say. In his experience, the eyes of the dead never really stopped following you.

"He's gone," Malfoy finally said. "He can't hurt you."

"I let him in," she said, in a faint, quivering voice. "I thought it was the Order, coming to get me."

Malfoy was quiet a moment, letting this new information fit in with the rest.

"It's okay," he said. "I should have been paying more attention."

Hermione's face was dewy with the cold sweat of shock. She started to cry, and Malfoy drew her closer. She curled to her side and pressed her forehead to his thigh, sobbing.

"It's my fault," she whispered again, her voice cracking. "I just can't get it right. No matter how hard I try."

"Hey," Malfoy said, taking her hand. "Look at me. It's alright—it's over now."

But Hermione turned and threw up. She shuddered. Malfoy's concern mounted.

"Everything will be fine," he promised. He tried to turn her face to look up at him but her eyes were glassy and wouldn't focus. "It will be perfect. We'll leave, and go somewhere else. We can forget this happened."

"I killed him," Hermione repeated, and this time her voice was frighteningly hollow.

"No," Malfoy said at once. He was beginning to suspect what a mortal sin this might seem to her, how damaged she would be if she believed she'd taken a life. "No, darling. That was me."

Hermione's eyes were blank and dry now; she had stopped crying. The tears that had already slid down her cheeks finished their journey, falling to the floor where they gathered in powdery beads, rolling in the dust-covered stone.

"I wish I was dead," she breathed. Like a prayer.

Malfoy was struck silent.

"Don't say that," he said finally. "Don't ever say that."

Hermione gave no reaction.

Malfoy tried to lift her to his chest. She swayed emptily, a dried husk.

"Hermione," he begged quietly. "Don't say that. I'm sorry."

He had been so careful, so careful with his beautiful girl.

But he'd broken her in the end, anyway.

~

Hermione didn't speak for a while, after that.

Malfoy stayed on the ground beside her, using the time to cast Healing spells on them both. Fixing the injuries he could see.

Hermione stared blankly at nothing, still curled tightly on her side. Malfoy worked in silence.

An hour or so later, when he was strong enough, he carried her through the wreckage of the house.

Malfoy's arm was still weak, but he kept Hermione's weight braced against his chest as much as possible and relied on what little magic he had left to dull his pain and keep himself going.

He was going to take her to the bedroom, if it was still there, and let her rest. He would move them somewhere else, when she was stronger. He would find a new home for them.

*I wish I was dead.*

He needed to take care of her. Surely, once she'd rested, once her injuries were healed, she would recover. She would be happy again—

Malfoy's thoughts were abruptly cut short. His eyes found a small, black form on the ground.

He came to a swaying stop, staring down at it.

Crow.

Malfoy lifted his hand to cover Hermione's eyes. The cat looked so tiny. It was motionless, its glossy black fur rendered gray in spots by the falling dust.

The grief that burst to life in Malfoy's chest caught him off guard. He bent down to pick Crow up. He would bury the cat outside, later. Somewhere lovely.

But when Malfoy's fingers curled around Crow's side, the kitten was warm. The body quivered.

Then, Crow lifted his small black head and mewed piteously.

"God," Malfoy breathed, dizzy with relief. "Thank you, *thank you*—"

Crow was injured—had been knocked out, it looked like—but had only a single spot of wet, blood-soaked fur on him. Just on the side of his shoulder, where Dolohov's spell had clipped him.

Malfoy picked the cat up and kissed the velvety center of its head, right between its ears. He laid the cat next to Hermione, nestled between her head and Malfoy's chest.

Crow meowed eagerly at Hermione but she didn't seem to hear him.

"Hermione," he whispered, looking down at her. "Crow is here. Look, he's alright."

When Hermione still didn't react, the knife's tip of fear that was already pressed to Malfoy's heart drove deeper. He tried to fight back the increasingly frantic concern building in his chest. He had always thought of survival as a physical thing. But all about Hermione was the visceral sense of a sputtering of light, like a candle being put out. Was there such a thing as death of spirit? Malfoy thought of his mother, and the way she'd seemed dead such a long time, though Dolohov had claimed her life only this day.

Malfoy walked faster.

The sounds of his footsteps must have been louder as a result—there was the sound of something stirring nearby in response, as though roused. And then a voice pierced the dusty silence of the wrecked house. A woman's voice.

"Hello?" came the thin call. "Theo, is that you?"

It was Pansy.

Malfoy followed her voice. Pansy was on the ground, looking very pale and broken between twin piles of rubble. Her breathing was labored; one of her ankles was clearly smashed. The fabric of her dress at the hem was soaked with blood.

Malfoy wondered if he ought to cover Hermione's eyes, but she still seemed entirely dissociated from their surroundings.

"Theodore's gone," Malfoy told her. "I'm sorry."

"Got himself killed, did he?" Pansy asked faintly. She was looking at Malfoy in a way that she hadn't in years. They had been real friends once, before the war and everything had taken on its own inescapable velocity. "What an idiot. I didn't know what he was doing, Draco. I'm \_\_"

She had to stop to take a labored breath.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's not your fault," Malfoy said quietly. Her breathing sounded very bad. "Pansy—your lung is punctured. I'm going to need to fix it. But you'll have to hold still."

"Just leave it," Pansy said.

But her face was white, and her lips were already turning blue.

"I don't think you have that choice," Malfoy said.

"I'm tired of not having choices," she said. "I want you to leave it. Please."

Malfoy looked at her for a long moment.

"Alright," he finally said. He lowered himself to a seat beside her, bracing Hermione and Crow against his chest.

Pansy was dying. He would stay here with her, for that.

"It doesn't seem like you're too broken up about him," Malfoy said, trying to keep Pansy distracted from the pain. "I suppose you always did have the worst taste in men. Theodore. Me, once upon a time."

Pansy laughed weakly, though the exhalations turned to coughs halfway through.

"Well," she said, pausing to take a rattling breath. "You know. There was—one other."

She reached out, and for a moment Malfoy thought Pansy was trying to take his hand. But then he realized she was scrabbling weakly at something buried in the rubble next to her. A little wooden box, the corner of it crushed by some stones.

Malfoy helped pick it up. He handed it over, but Pansy shook her head and by her gesture and expression he surmised he was meant to look in the box himself.

"I was trying to take it with me," Pansy said. "But maybe it works out better this way."

Malfoy opened the box. He stilled when he saw the contents.

"I need a favor," Pansy said, and her voice was very thin now. "Sorry to ask. But—I want you to bury me with him."

Malfoy didn't answer, which Pansy seemed to take as hesitation.

"I know his—his friends won't be keen," Pansy went on breathlessly. "But there's some stuff in there that I hoped might convince them. Love letters and—"

She paused to inhale, dry and labored.

"—and junk," she finished quietly.

There were photographs in the box. Most of them were of sandy-haired, round-faced Neville with his arm around Pansy.

In the top-most moving image, Neville kissed her. There was a Gryffindor tie around his neck that Pansy giggled and tugged at. This had to be fifth or sixth year, before the war. How had they kept it a secret? They must have had to sneak around...

Malfoy watched as the two photographed lovers gazed giddily at each other under the night sky, the dark edge of the Great Lake just visible behind them. They stared at each other again and again, kissed again and again.

Eternally and blissfully frozen together, in the past.

Malfoy felt an inexplicable lump in his throat. He shifted the photos to the side. Under them were letters. The ink was faded: Pansy's looping cursive and Neville's blocky handwriting. The pages featuring the latter were worse for wear. Smudged and creased with rereads. Blurred in spots, the ink smeared with fingerprints.

Under the letters were dried blossoms—daisies and lavender—perhaps from a meaningful bouquet.

And under the flowers was a wand.

"You and Longbottom," Malfoy said.

"Yeah," she said, and for perhaps the first time in all the years he'd known Pansy, Malfoy heard true pride in her voice. "Me and him."

"Is this his wand?" Malfoy asked.

She nodded.

"You can bury it with us, or not. Assuming—"

She laughed a little now, though tears came down too.

"Assuming it's alright with his friends."

She turned her gaze up to the ceiling, as though self conscious—even now—of letting her emotions be so nakedly visible.

“I just really want to see him again,” Pansy said quietly. “I never got to see where they buried him, you know. I missed the funeral. So.”

She tried to inhale, but only managed to take in enough air for half a breath.

“It would be nice,” she finished.

Malfoy hung his head and stared at the ground.

“Your lung is collapsing,” he said quietly. “I can still try to fix it. It’s not too late.”

“It is,” Pansy said evenly. “It is far too late.”

She didn’t speak after that, only lay there, one side of her chest rising and falling with visible strain. The other side had stopped moving at all.

Malfoy stayed with her. He held Hermione and Crow close to him.

An hour later, Pansy slipped away.

Her eyes closed when her chest finally went still, and Malfoy was glad for that, at least. He didn’t want the last thing she saw to be the destroyed ceiling of a home that wasn’t even her own.

He stayed just long enough to say goodbye, then stood.

He was intently aware now of what he had to do. Of what it seemed he had always been meant to do.

He was growing weaker with each step. But Malfoy held Hermione and Crow steady. Pansy’s box was tucked inside his cloak.

His feet seemed to navigate the way of their own accord—like they still remembered the layout of the house, even though now all that was left was rubble (here they were passing the tapestry of the hound dogs, here they were passing the kitchens...).

Malfoy thought of a few things, in that final stretch of distance to the Floo. His thoughts were blurred and hard to follow, like moths darting in the night.

Malfoy thought of his mother. And the way she never recovered after Lucius’s death.

He thought of Harry Potter—the boy whose parents had sacrificed themselves to save him.

And Malfoy thought of Neville Longbottom.

Neville—whose wand had remained lovingly hidden all this time, undiscovered by an army, in a box full of love notes and dried flowers.

How strange it was, the way everything again and again came back to love.

Malfoy arrived at the Floo, then summoned a fistful of powder, swaying with the effort of staying upright.

“The Commander’s estate,” he said, stepping into the fire.

For the last time, they left his house.

The sight of Narcissa’s body was no easier for having prepared himself for it.

It looked to have been fast and clean, at least. Dolohov had killed the Commander right there on her throne. Malfoy knew his mother wouldn’t have put up a fight—she’d been ready to go a long while.

Her body was thin but still somehow regal in death—her pale blonde head was lifted high, never to move again. Her empty eyes were cast upwards to the shattered sword of Gryffindor, mounted on the wall above her. *Ex dolore vires*.

Malfoy bowed his head, paying his final respects.

He turned to face the back wall of the throne room.

This was the wall Narcissa had faced, day in and day out when she sat upon her throne. It was windowless and dusty and destroyed, much like the rest of the house. On it were two dully faded oil paintings and a single large, decrepit bookshelf. Derelict, molding.

Narcissa had been a gifted enchantress in her own right. Malfoy began to undo the illusions that covered the wall.

How badly he’d once wished for Narcissa to give up her desperate pipe dream, and now here he was. Hoping that her life’s project would, as she had fervently believed, be complete now, with Longbottom’s wand.

The oil paintings melted to nothing, and then the bookshelf flickered in and out of focus as the final layer of illusions began to peel away.

Malfoy took out Longbottom’s wand from the box. It smelled faintly of lavender and old parchment.

Thirty-some people at the Battle of the Ministry, but—as chance would have it—it had been Neville’s wand that fired that fateful spell. And only Neville’s wand had a chance of undoing the damage. Magic was poetic like that, sometimes.

The tall, skeletal frame of the shattered Time Turner cabinet materialized before Malfoy.

## Chapter End Notes

CW: character death, character expressing suicidal thought (wishing they were dead, no clear plan or express desire to act on it).

# Chapter 27

**May 1, 1998**

**7 years prior**

*"We need to leave the country," Lucius said, rifling through his desk drawers. His office was in disarray. "Tonight. Before the borders close entirely."*

*"Lucius, calm yourself," Narcissa said. "We're not going anywhere. I know you believe winning the Dark Lord's favor back is impossible, but—"*

*Lucius laughed. His thin body—weakened by Azkaban—seemed to rattle, like the shaking boughs of a barren tree.*

*"Win his favor back? I would be lucky to be tolerated, after my failure at the Ministry. No—you don't understand, Cissie. We need to run. Get your papers. And Draco's—he can meet us in Hogsmeade—"*

*"How can you ask that of us? Leave our home? And Draco—you want him to leave school, leave his friends?"*

*"We have no choice!" Lucius said. His face was haggard. "Once the Dark Lord wins, he will thin his ranks. Kill those no longer useful to him."*

*"You are being paranoid! You made one mistake only, Lucius. I know you can gain his trust back—"*

*"Enough!" Lucius yelled.*

*Narcissa flinched. He had never raised his voice at her. Never.*

*"I'm sorry," he said at once.*

*But Narcissa didn't want an apology.*

*In her eyes, Lucius would forever be the handsome older man who'd spirited her away from the clutches of her abusive mother and gambling-addict father.*

*The man who promised never to let her go without. The man who'd waited under her window with a bouquet of white roses in his hand while Narcissa threw her clothes in a bag and climbed down the wall of her parents' house to run away with him.*

*He was ten feet tall in her eyes—a man of near-mythological strength and influence.*

*No, Narcissa didn't want an apology. She wanted her husband back.*

*"You are being a coward," Narcissa said, her voice shaking.*

*Lucius straightened slowly. His eyes on her were wide with shock.*

*Never in her life had Narcissa spoken this way to him.*

*"The Dark Lord is going to win—" Lucius started saying again, but Narcissa slammed her palm on the desk between them.*

*"We should be thrilled at his imminent victory! You have won his trust before, Lucius. You have ensured our family's fortune and safety before, and you can do so again. You need to. Make all of our family's sacrifices worth it."*

*"Are you telling me," Lucius said quietly. "That if I ran, you would not come with me?"*

*The silence that hung between them was frosty and fragile. A spiderweb, hung with frozen dew.*

*"That is exactly what I'm telling you," Narcissa said.*

*Lucius looked away, down at the ground. Not meeting her eyes now. Reeling.*

*Narcissa waited.*

*She knew that if there was one true thing in the world, it was her husband's love for her. He would never leave her. He would do whatever he had to, to keep her.*

*"Alright," Lucius finally said. Narcissa exhaled. "Let's do things your way."*

*Her way.*

How she tortured herself later on this memory, choking on each detail of it, reliving it like a nightmare that clung to the inside of her eyes. Impossible to shake off, waking or asleep.

Lucius Malfoy did not run, at his beloved wife's request. And he was dead twenty-four hours later.

~

The jinx that had destroyed the cabinet at the Ministry had been an ordinary offensive spell. Fired in haste by Neville, one of many strewn across the Department of Mysteries that night.

It had struck the top left pane of glass, shattering it, before passing through and causing the first Time Turner it encountered to explode. Then the next, then the next.

The force of it all—the distortion in time, the fabric of reality bending—made the cabinet twist and crumple.

All twenty-four hourglasses in the Ministry's possession were destroyed. The cabinet—itself a powerful time artifact, steeped in the magic of the Time Turners it housed—was destroyed

as well.

Over the course of human history, the number of people left broken-hearted by grief—people who would give life and limb for the chance to do things over—numbered in the millions.

But of them all, only Narcissa Malfoy managed to procure the raw materials that might give her a chance of doing so.

The cabinet. The shattered Time Turners. The bulbs of broken glass and the spilled sand of twenty four different hourglasses—black and white and yellow and grey—fallen thick on the cabinet’s wooden floor in a streaky carpet of colors.

Like a palette of paints, a tray of clay. And from it Narcissa intended to remake her destiny.

A Time Turner, she theorized, needn’t be in the shape of an hourglass. Maybe it could be something much larger.

Something large enough to step into.

~

Malfoy stared at the Time Turner cabinet now. His mother’s project, her most desperate desire.

All over the cabinet were signs of failed attempts at repair. Stains on the wood from experimental potions. Places where the wood grain was warped, from hopeless spells that could never have worked—not without the right wand.

For all Narcissa’s heartache, she had failed for lack of one tool. Fifteen and a quarter inches, cherry wood and unicorn hair. Malfoy flipped Longbottom’s wand between his fingers.

Then, he lifted it and pointed the tip to the old oak cabinet.

*“Reparo.”*

One of the four corner beams of the cabinet glowed. The mildewed grain of the plank seemed to come to attention. Recognizing the magic of the misfired jinx that had destroyed it, all those years ago.

With a creaking sound, the beam straightened. Dust fell from the agitated wood, and Malfoy watched with barely suppressed amazement as the grains of the beam lined up, as it melded the shattered fibers together.

And then it was fixed.

Just like that, one side of the cabinet was like new. Already creaking in protest at having to carry the weight of its layabout brothers.

Malfoy lowered the wand. His heart raced.

Had part of him hoped that this plan would be a dead end? That he could stay here in this world with Hermione, that he could coax her into forgetting the pain of the past...

He looked at her now.

Hermione was lying curled on her side on the sofa. His cloak was laid over her, and for a moment, the horrible image of it as her funeral shroud danced before Malfoy's eyes.

Her words echoed in his head.

*I wish I was dead.*

*I wish I was dead.*

Malfoy turned back around.

He rolled up his sleeves and continued the process of fixing things.

~

Time, speaking of it, passed very strangely. Perhaps it was the proximity to the cabinet.

The seconds passed in a blurred, almost paralyzingly slow march.

But somehow, paradoxically, the repair of the Time Turner cabinet progressed with startling ease. As though this was the path things had always hurtled towards, as though now the little pieces and players on the stage of the world needed only to shift out of the way to let what was meant to be come to fruition.

The four corners soon stood perfectly straight. And then the glass windows were reassembled as well. Malfoy began the much more intricate process of weaving enchantments between the wood and the broken pieces of the hourglasses. Spells his mother had invented. Spells she had catalogued in dozens of sheets of parchment, her graceful script, tight and packed with desperation.

Malfoy ran through these.

When there were only a handful of pages left, he woke Hermione. He had put her in a charmed sleep earlier, hoping it would offer her some respite. He revived her now, out of concern that he would run out of magic before being able to finish the cabinet. He would need her to help him, if that happened.

Malfoy sank to a seat next to where she lay. He picked up her hand and squeezed it lightly, waiting for her to blink awake.

"Hermione," he whispered. He brushed some tangled curls out of her face. "Darling."

It took a while. Malfoy had to resort to using *Renervate*, a charm usually only necessary in cases of stupefaction.

Whatever flame had kept Hermione going all these years had been nearly extinguished by the events of the past few hours.

But finally—with patient coaxing—Hermione’s eyes opened. They were bleary and dazed, like she was being dragged awake against her body’s will. She turned her face to look up at him. Then she looked down and to the side. Malfoy knew she was searching for Dolohov’s body.

“We’re not there anymore,” he said.

“Where are we?”

“Malfoy Manor.”

Hermione squinted against the thin light from the shaded lamp. She closed her eyes, resting her head again on the cushion.

“Are we hiding out here?” she whispered dully.

Crow had come to attention at the sound of Hermione’s voice. He clambered quickly up over her body so he could curl in the hollow of her neck, purring loudly. Hermione blinked harder, then suddenly sat up. She clutched Crow and held him out in front of her, staring.

“Crow?” she gasped. “Crow. Oh god—I thought—“

Her words broke apart into sobs and Hermione clung to the kitten, pressing him into her chest. Malfoy watched, his heart twisting at the sight of her tears.

“He’s a tough one,” he said softly. “Just got knocked out. Seems totally fine now.”

“Thank you for going back for him,” Hermione said, her shoulders still shaking. “I don’t know what happened—I can’t remember—”

They were silent together, Crow still mewling joyously at Hermione’s firm embrace.

“Hermione,” Malfoy said quietly, after a moment. “I need your help, sweetheart.”

He had never said these words to her before. Hermione seemed aware of it, too. She lowered Crow into her lap and cast a quick, worried gaze at Malfoy.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. She wiped at her wet cheeks, and her voice trembled when she asked: “Are you hurt?”

“I’m alright. Just running low on magic. But I need you to help me finish casting the spells, if I run out before I can finish.”

He looked towards the back wall of the room, where the tall cabinet stood. Hermione followed his gaze.

There was a brief moment of silence, and then Hermione started getting to her feet.

"Are those the Ministry's Time Turners?" she whispered.

"The hourglasses are all broken. But it doesn't matter. I'm doing some custom magic on the cabinet itself."

Hermione approached the cabinet.

"What are you trying to do?" she asked, looking at him.

"Go back. And fix things."

"Fix what?"

"Whatever I need to. So that you don't end up in a world where you don't care if you live or die."

Hermione blinked quickly. Malfoy saw her mouth quiver, and she pressed a hand to her lips.

"Malfoy," she said, and her voice shook with the effort of keeping her words steady. "That's insane. Magic of that kind isn't even possible."

But there was a cracked sliver of hope in her voice. And that told Malfoy everything he needed to know.

"You should look at the papers," he said, easing himself with a wince off the sofa. "Maybe you can help me make sure I haven't made any mistakes."

~

Malfoy was grateful to have Hermione's help.

He was magically depleted, exhausted and none too physically sound. But the comfort of having Hermione awake—of seeing hope and some life return to her eyes—was a relief beyond compare.

The cabinet was already exuding a great deal of time magic, even without the full set of spells being complete. Malfoy watched Hermione step up close to it, watched her read Narcissa's notes and compare them to the magical readings emanating from the cabinet. The wood seemed to cast a glow on her face. Shifting like the light of day changing over the course of many hours. Pale and yellow and then bright white and then burning, sinking orange. And then darkness. And then again.

Malfoy watched it all happen. He thought of how many days he would have to be without her, if he did succeed in going back.

He might *never* even have her, in this other, better world. Perhaps she'd marry Weasley.

"The magic theory is sound," Hermione said, taking a seat next to him. She rubbed her forehead. "Your mother really did all this? It's exceedingly complex for one person."

"She worked on it for a long while," Malfoy said.

"I can see she was—extremely concerned with whether going back in time would actually change *this* reality too. It seemed she wanted to make sure she'd be resetting things. Not just creating a new and different timeline. She spent a lot of energy researching to make sure that there would only be one universe."

"Yes. I suppose she wanted to make sure she fixed things for real," Malfoy said.

Hermione continued looking at the notes.

"It's very elegant," she said quietly. "One person goes back. But instead of being an addition to the past—as a normal Time Turner would do—they take the place of their past self. And in doing so, the timeline snaps back and rejoins itself at the earlier date. Everything that happens after—just never happened. A do-over."

She looked up at him. And there was something a little pained in her eyes now.

"So," she said. "That's your plan. To go back. And everything from the last however many years is undone. And you set it all right, and none of this ever happened."

"Just about."

"But that means I won't remember you did this. I won't remember any of us."

"I didn't think that would bother you very much," he said.

"Maybe it does."

Malfoy looked away. His mouth suddenly felt very dry.

"I don't think we can have it both ways," he said. "I wish we could."

"Are you planning on kidnapping me again?" she asked.

Malfoy was surprised enough to laugh.

"I doubt it would be well-received in the better version of the world," he said. "But I intend on going after you, if that's what you're asking."

"And if I want nothing to do with you?" Hermione asked. "I bet I'll be very well-adjusted and have many suitors."

"The thought did occur to me," he said, unamused. "I don't yet know if I'll be able to handle it gracefully. And if I can't, I suppose you'll just have to hope I don't fall back into my old habit of stealing you by force."

She snorted, still wiping her eyes.

"I'll try to remember you."

"I know."

They were silent together for a moment.

"If things go wrong," Malfoy said. "If I go in there and it doesn't work the way we expected—I need to know you'll be okay."

"You mean if you die," Hermione said.

"Yes. That's what I mean. I need to know you'll take care of yourself."

"It won't matter," she said. Her eyes were bright. "This is it, as far as I'm concerned. This world is all messed up, Malfoy—I always *knew*, I always *felt*—"

She trailed off, lips trembling. But then her jaw set.

"I always knew it was wrong," she said, meeting his eyes. "I can't explain how. There's no chance of a happy ending here. You going back, fixing it... it's the only thing that makes sense. There's no point in thinking about what happens if it doesn't work."

Malfoy closed his eyes, fighting back the little surge of panic he felt at her words.

"I cannot take the risk of entering that cabinet without knowing you'll take care of yourself," Malfoy said. His heart twisted rapidly in his chest. He would have no control over things, if he was gone, if she was here alone—"I'm doing this for you. To fix things *for you*. The chance that, if the magic is wrong, I might be abandoning you instead—that if I died, you would just be here—alone—and not caring what happens to you—"

He was unable to continue speaking. Malfoy stared at the cabinet, his jaw working convulsively.

"I can't wrap my head around it," he said thickly. "You need to promise me you won't give up. I can't do this without knowing that."

There was no sound in the room for a few moments, other than Malfoy's quiet, unsteady breaths.

"You don't have to worry," Hermione said finally. "I'll take care of myself."

"Tell me what you'll do."

"I'll go back to the safe house," she said. "The Order will protect me."

"Good. I've cast the Portkey charm on the ring of keys on the table," Malfoy said without looking at her. He'd already thought it all through. "The same one that was on my signet ring. If I die, it'll activate. And I left my wand there too. It's yours. Go back immediately, and keep yourself safe—"

He heard her feet move. And then Hermione's arms were thrown around his shoulders, her face pressed to his chest. She stood on her toes to better bury her face into his shirt.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Malfoy closed his eyes and pressed his lips to the top of Hermione's head. When she tipped her face back and he kissed her, he tried not to think about the possibility that he would never get to do so again.

"Where's Crow?" she asked in a wobbly voice, her lips twisting with the effort of keeping tears back. She let go of Malfoy to look around. "C'mere Crow... say goodbye."

Hermione picked up the kitten from the floor, then held him up to Malfoy.

"Goodbye, Crow," Malfoy said quietly, stooping to kiss his pink nose.

"You should take him with you," Hermione whispered. "He might just disappear on the journey. Getting younger and younger and then gone, you know... But if he stays here, he'll *certainly* disappear when the world goes back in time. At least this way, there's a chance he'll pass through some time loophole. He can keep you company. So you're not the only one who remembers everything..."

The thought of having a friend on this lonely journey was too compelling to pass on. Malfoy took Crow from Hermione and nestled him under his robes.

There were five additional charms that they needed to cast, charms that would trigger the cabinet and whoever was inside it to begin hurtling back into the past.

Malfoy cast these carefully, reciting the enchantments to Hermione as he went so she could confirm they matched Narcissa's notes.

"One more *Annualto* there," she murmured, pointing to the left beam. "Good. Now, on the sand on the cabinet floor..."

Malfoy finished, then stepped inside the cabinet. The final spell would need to be cast from the outside by Hermione.

The cabinet was very small, and as the doors swung shut Crow wriggled under Malfoy's robes. Perhaps the kitten was able to detect Malfoy's escalating heart rate, at the sight of Hermione alone on the outside of the cabinet. Was this a mistake? Was he abandoning her?

But Hermione was wiping her cheeks, her mouth wobbling, and he tamped down his own concern.

"Chin up," Malfoy said. His voice sounded extra loud to him in the confines of the cabinet, but he saw from the answering tilt of Hermione's head that she must have heard him clearly. "You can do it, darling."

Hermione nodded. She lifted Longbottom's wand and pointed it at the cabinet.

"*Reversito*," she said. Her face worked with suppressed emotion as the final spell took effect.

The sand around Malfoy's boots began to swirl.

"I love you," he said, as the wind picked up. "*I love you*. I'll see you soon."

She sobbed and stepped forward, to the glass. Just before her outstretched fingers touched the cabinet, the universe seemed to slow and sparkle. Like the fabric of reality was glimmering, bright and brief, in a precise slant of light.

Malfoy stared at Hermione. The sight of her, the last sight of her...

Then everything gave a sharp, nauseating jerk.

The cabinet flew backwards with all the force of a Gringotts cart at full speed. Malfoy staggered forward, struggling to keep Crow protected as he knocked into the sides of the cabinet. Hermione was gone, the room was gone, everything unraveled like a tapestry made of a million fine stitches, each unbraiding into nothing.

The wind was so intense that it resembled a trapped tornado in the tiny space of the cabinet. Sand whipped against Malfoy's skin, and he had to cover his face and duck his head to avoid being blinded. He kept his robes tightly closed, keeping a quivering Crow protected.

As the cabinet hurtled backwards faster and faster, as the velocity seemed to reach light-speed, Malfoy felt something deep in his soul loosen.

With a pang, Malfoy realized it was his Unbreakable Vow. His promise to Hermione, to help the Order.

As the cabinet rocketed faster, as days and weeks and years fell to the side like so many damaged scales, revealing healthy tissue underneath, Malfoy felt the Vow unravel like ribbons spinning away in water. It was done. He had fulfilled his promise. His last connection with Hermione—gone.

Malfoy tried to focus only on the fact that the Vow dissolving had to mean things were working as intended. He forced his eyes open so he could stay aware of what was happening outside of the cabinet windows. It was mostly dark, interrupted at random intervals by bursts of color and movement. Scenes from the past, visible for a blinking instant as the cabinet flew by.

Most appeared and disappeared before any detail at all could be made out. But by and by Malfoy noticed that the cabinet occasionally slowed long enough to see a past scene unfold.

The ones that lingered long enough to be witnessed were almost all on the battlefield, though a few non-violent Ministry settings flew past as well. Malfoy watched more than one Wizengamot meeting streak by. Laws being passed, or repealed. He suspected the cabinet was slowing down for the pivotal moments in history. Where the balance of power had shifted, where some new milestone had been eked out that permanently altered the landscape of all future events.

Just as Malfoy was getting used to the strange rhythm of scenes flying past, the cabinet slowed so abruptly that he and Crow hit the side of the wall. He staggered to his feet, trying to remain upright.

The cabinet was nearly at a full stop. Was it over? Was he here? Malfoy tried the doors but they didn't open.

He squinted against the darkness at the windows, trying to see out.

They were in the Great Hall of Hogwarts.

On the Headmaster's chair sat Voldemort, leaned back with his legs spread. His pale skin was glowing with victory, his snake-like features vicious with triumph.

This was the day of the Battle of Hogwarts. Voldemort had just killed Harry Potter.

Malfoy knew what was coming.

He hadn't been there—but he'd heard the story.

With the benefit of future omniscience, Malfoy could see easily that Voldemort was weakened from battle. But the Dark Lord was too flush with the victory over Potter to be concerned by his physical state. The prophecy had come to fruition, after all. He had defeated the Boy Who Lived, and no other risk felt possible.

On either side of Voldemort stood his favored Death Eaters. A few—Yaxley, Goyle—were noticeably missing. They were out in the world, helping Voldemort identify new precious artifacts to turn into his next set of Horcruxes, now that the old ones had been destroyed over the course of battle.

Voldemort, still ecstatic with victory, had deemed this day *Rebirth Day*.

New Horcruxes, for him. A new dawn for the wizarding world, with the Boy Who Lived defeated.

And a cleansing day for Voldemort's ranks.

One by one, Voldemort summoned his weakest followers—the failures or the traitors—and executed them before the eyes of his other Death Eaters.

Wormtail and Snape were the first to die.

And then it was Lucius's turn.

Malfoy watched with a tight-jawed attempt at indifference as his father was struck in the chest by a killing curse. He watched as Lucius—thin, his face lined and weary with fear—slumped forward and hit the stone floors of the Great Hall.

The scene wobbled, the very air rippling like heat over flame. A critical moment in history. Though Voldemort didn't know it yet.

The bodies were left to lie where they fell at the feet of Voldemort's throne.

Not long after, Narcissa—visibly shaking—came to collect the body of her husband.

The rippling was so intense now that it almost felt like Malfoy was watching everything happen underwater.

Narcissa trembled as she approached the throne. A thick black funeral cloak hung over her frame, and her shoulders were so thin that heavy fabric seemed to nearly be dragging her to the floor.

Voldemort looked thoroughly amused by her arrival, his face lazy with unconcern. Though there was no sound audible in the scene, Malfoy saw Voldemort's lips move.

*You may take the body for burial, if you wish*

Narcissa nodded and shuddered, then crouched to the floor, clutching her dead husband. She pressed her quivering lips to Lucius's cold forehead and whispered something to him. A farewell.

When at last she stood and came to kneel before Voldemort's throne, Malfoy knew the Dark Lord saw only a pathetic, snivelling widow.

Voldemort, who had never loved any other person in his entire life, was thus unable to understand the feeling of losing someone more cherished than life itself. He was doomed, as all mortals are, to only have the capacity to see the situation through his own eyes.

The situation, as he saw it, was thus:

He had killed a failed follower.

The widow was here, to collect the corpse.

The widow, now without the protection of her husband, would pledge her loyalty and beg for mercy for herself and what remained of her family.

And a heartless Voldemort was paradoxically unable to predict something that another human might have instinctively known:

That Narcissa Malfoy had come here to kill him. And that she didn't care if she died in the attempt, and indeed even hoped for the relief of death.

Narcissa's pale lips moved and Malfoy saw them in silhouette, pledging her loyalty. Thanking Voldemort for giving her husband a fast and painless death.

Narcissa tipped her face up to say something else. It appeared that her words were too quiet for Voldemort to hear. He leaned a little closer to listen.

And then Narcissa's shoulders moved, fast as a shark in water. Voldemort's body jerked in response. Violently, and only once.

The room was still, the Death Eaters staring at the throne as though in a rigor mortis of shock.

Nobody moved as Narcissa rose slowly to her feet. No longer trembling, the show done and over. She stood, and as she did, Voldemort's rigid body rose slightly with her. Narcissa gave a final shoving motion. The entire hall watched as Voldemort's stiff, lifeless body—without protection, without Horcruxes—fell to the floor.

The sword of Gryffindor—no longer disguised as Narcissa's mourning cloak—was thrust through Voldemort's head. Up through the bottom of his pale jaw.

Narcissa turned to face the room, a fury of grief and triumph on her face.

The scene unraveled. Another moment in time undone, another knot untightened.

And then the cabinet picked up speed once more.

~

Malfoy lost track of time, lost track of himself. He felt his own body change, felt the cells regenerate and die and regenerate and die in the wrong order. He held tight to Crow, alert to the possibility of the kitten shrinking away into nothing. But Crow remained warm and small against him, shaking with apparent fear. Malfoy couldn't blame him. He wasn't sure how much longer he could remain in here and keep his sanity.

But then, finally, the cabinet plummeted to the earth with a bone-shaking crash. The door, knocked by the force of the cabinet's landing, unlatched and swung open.

Malfoy staggered out. Crow yowled and clawed free of Malfoy's robes, darting out of sight and under a nearby table.

The room they had stepped out into was full of furniture.

It was just as cluttered and massive as he remembered, the Room of Requirement.

Malfoy stumbled over his feet, his body feeling like that of a stranger's. He was younger—the makeup of his muscles was all wrong. He was thinner and more wiry.

His nausea was powerful and his vision was spotting. But through it all Malfoy managed to confirm he was in the right time and place. The Room of Requirement. And—turning around, yes—there was the black lacquered face of the Vanishing Cabinet. The one he had spent all year fixing. Malfoy staggered to stay upright.

Swaying, forcing himself to focus, Malfoy wiped sweat off his forehead and checked his wrist. On it was the black dragon hide watch he'd worn every day, his sixth year of Hogwarts.

The hands on the clock showed eleven thirteen.

Malfoy loosened the collar of his Slytherin uniform, the material unfamiliar to him, and looked around for somewhere to sit and wait.

Crow's glowing eyes were visible under the blue upholstered armchair in front of the Vanishing Cabinet.

Malfoy sat in the chair, trying to regain his strength. From underneath he heard Crow mewl.

How well Malfoy remembered this chair. Blue and velvet and overstuffed, a little bit of damage on one of its wooden legs from when Malfoy had kicked it in fury, desperate and panicked at his inability to fix the Vanishing Cabinet. He'd sat here countless hours, running his hands through his hair, fearing for himself and his family.

A lifetime ago.

He was so different now.

Malfoy patted his pocket, and there in his school robes was his wand. He took it out and set it on his knee, still keeping an eye on the doors of the Vanishing Cabinet.

Not willing to repeat the grief of the past, Malfoy cast a gentle freezing spell on Crow, so the kitten wouldn't run into the fray.

Four minutes later, at eleven seventeen, the doors to the Vanishing Cabinet kicked open.

Yaxley stepped out.

He met Malfoy's eyes with a wide, yellow-toothed smile.

"Nice work, boy," he rasped. "Finally did it, did you?"

Malfoy remembered very well how this had gone, the first time around.

He had been sick to his stomach, so scared, and at the same time dizzy with relief. He'd muttered something cocky and Yaxley had barked a derisive laugh.

This time, he felt neither scared nor dizzy nor full of false bravado.

He felt calm. And old.

Yaxley's smile flickered as he searched Malfoy's eyes. And Malfoy knew it was because Yaxley had correctly identified that he had never in his life before met the person standing in front of him.

*"Avada Kedavra,"* Malfoy said.

Yaxley fell dead at Malfoy's feet.

The Carrows came out next, and Malfoy killed them with cold, quick efficiency.

Then Towle.

Then Gibbon.

And finally, Greyback.

The bodies piled atop each other, each in the same small expanse of space. One and a half steps outside of the Vanishing Cabinet.

Malfoy swayed and then sat back in the blue upholstered chair. Sweat beaded on his forehead and he wiped it with his sleeve.

Yaxley's body was on the ground nearest him, its shoulder against Malfoy's ankle. He kicked the corpse away with the toe of his shoe.

With a quick glance at the number of bodies on the floor, Malfoy silently confirmed that no one else was coming. These were all the Death Eaters he'd let into Hogwarts, all those years ago.

He leaned back in the chair and lifted his wand up to the ceiling. Malfoy cast two alarm charms, then waited for Dumbledore and the Aurors to arrive.

## Chapter 28

This time around, the war ended significantly earlier.

The fact that six key Death Eaters had been slaughtered on the day of what should have been the Battle of the Astronomy Tower was critical to Voldemort's defeat.

This made Malfoy both a traitor and a hero, a fact that didn't stop the Ministry from holding him in Azkaban (unfortunately, six killing curses in succession was too great a crime to be easily outweighed by the moral victory of defecting to the Order) until the dust settled long enough for them to try to figure out what to make of him.

Dumbledore visited Malfoy the day after Voldemort was killed.

The Headmaster looked thin but otherwise healthy. His blackened hand appeared to be healing.

It was unexpectedly moving, to see him alive.

Malfoy stood out of respect when Dumbledore appeared, and didn't sit again until Dumbledore conjured himself a chair and lowered himself into it with a regal sweep.

"Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore said.

"Professor," Malfoy said. "It's good to see you."

"Ah, is it now?" Dumbledore asked, sounding amused. But there was something sharp and curious in his clear blue eyes as he assessed Malfoy.

"Lying is not among my sins," Malfoy answered.

Dumbledore smiled.

"Voldemort is dead," he said. "I thought you'd be pleased to know."

"Yes, I heard the news. The guards give me the morning paper."

"A violation of Azkaban policy, no doubt," Dumbledore said mildly.

"One of them has a niece who was attacked by Greyback. He's grateful that I killed him."

"I see."

Dumbledore watched Malfoy over the top of his half moon spectacles.

"We owe the victory to your aid," Dumbledore said.

"Better a late defection than never, I should think?"

“Indeed,” Dumbledore said. He considered Malfoy a moment longer, then said: “Forgive me for saying this. But I do not believe you are Draco Malfoy.”

“I’m afraid you are mistaken.”

“Then you are not the same Draco Malfoy I knew.”

Malfoy didn’t deny this. He was taken aback by Dumbledore’s prescient sixth sense for magic, though he didn’t let the shock show.

The Headmaster took Malfoy’s silence as confirmation, but didn’t press further.

Dumbledore stood with a swish of purple robes. In the slant of morning light, he gave off an aura of lightness. Malfoy found that he was pleased the right side had won the war, this time around.

“Harry wishes to see you,” Dumbledore said. “He’ll be visiting later today, assuming you’re willing to answer his questions.”

“What does he want?”

“To understand your motives.”

“Is a change of heart not sufficient?”

Dumbledore’s mustache twitched with a little smile.

“He is prone to suspicion as far as you are concerned. As you might... remember.”

He dusted his robes off.

“I will be insisting on your release to the Wizengamot,” Dumbledore said. “I expect you’ll be released within the week. Possibly sooner, if your father has anything to say about it. With his coffers unfrozen he is quite back to his usual domineering self.”

Malfoy’s stomach flipped at the reminder that Lucius had survived in this universe. The sense of unreality that he’d battled ever since emerging from the Time Turner cabinet—the natural consequence of having experienced what no human being had ever been meant to experience—heightened. Malfoy tried to focus on his physical surroundings, to ground himself. An exercise he had to do frequently.

His cell in Azkaban was made of stone.

Through the single, tiny window, Malfoy was able to see the cold pale grey of the sky. He could hear the crash of waves against the island’s rocky shore.

It was almost summer. But still cold, on this desolate prison island.

“I look forward to my freedom,” Malfoy said. “Thank you for your visit.”

“No,” Dumbledore said with a smile. “Thank you for yours.”

He left before Malfoy could think of how to respond.

The old show-off.

~

Potter’s visit was not nearly so enigmatic.

Stubborn and easy-to-read as ever, the hero of the wizarding world came in with a scowl on his face and suspicious eyes. Though, to Potter’s credit, he seemed to be attempting to keep an open mind.

“Malfoy,” he said by way of greeting, standing just outside the bars of the cell.

“Potter.”

Potter didn’t bother to sit, and Malfoy didn’t bother to stand. He remained reclined on his cot, one leg propped up while the other dangled. Rereading the paper, searching for mentions of Hermione.

“I came to thank you,” Potter said. “And ask what gives.”

“You’re welcome. And nothing.”

This was met with a scowl.

“I’m not sure what possessed you to change sides, and in so—“ He struggled to find the word. “Violent... a fashion. Hermione thinks it’s because your family was on the line.”

Malfoy sat up abruptly at Hermione’s name.

“Is that right?” Malfoy asked.

“Yeah,” Potter said, scratching his jaw. “Um. She and Ron are here, actually, outside. They wanted to ask you questions too.”

“I’d be happy to talk to them.”

Harry poked his head out and said something to the Azkaban guard, and shortly after Weasley and Hermione entered the visiting half of the room. They both gave Malfoy wary, curious looks as they approached his cell.

Malfoy stood. He stepped up close to the divider, wrapping his fingers around the metal bars.

“Hello,” he said.

The cell was dark, and he relied on this fact to disguise the way he stared, starving, at her.

Hermione squinted through the dark to see him. But when their eyes met, she held his gaze without flinching, her expression bold and inquisitive. Malfoy smiled.

“Good shout, Malfoy,” Weasley grunted, oblivious to Malfoy’s singular focus. “My mum’s calling you a hero, which I think is a bit extreme. But thanks for turning coat.”

Malfoy said nothing, waiting for Hermione to speak.

“Yes,” she finally said, looking confused by Malfoy’s direct gaze. She cast a disconcerted look to Potter, who returned it. “Um. Thank you.”

“It was nothing.”

All three of them looked increasingly baffled as they observed him. How odd it must seem to them. Malfoy would have tried to disguise how different a person he was now, but frankly felt neither interested nor capable of masking himself.

“We’ve advocated for your expedited release,” Hermione said after a moment. “I think the Minister’s going to sign the forms today. So, um...”

Malfoy didn’t look away from her. How very young she seemed. Bright and unbroken.

Hermione narrowed her eyes in confusion, then touched her face. As though wondering if Malfoy was staring at her because she had some dirt on her nose.

“So I suppose we’ll see you back at school,” Potter finally said.

“Right,” Malfoy said. He stepped back from the cell bars and watched all three of them relax. “I look forward to it.”

~

The order from the Minister arrived before the day was even over. It seemed public sentiment was largely and cautiously in favor of Malfoy—though his unfettered use of killing curses remained the source of morbid curiosity.

Malfoy’s wand and school robes were returned to him.

He Floo’ed without fanfare back to the Malfoy estate.

Seeing the house again elicited a flood of unpleasant memories. It felt like walking through a dream. But the ruined floorboards were smooth and polished once more, the tapestries hanging from the wall clean and colorful.

And his parents were there.

Narcissa and Lucius were not waiting in the foyer, which would have been a deeply unseemly show of sentimentality. They did the next best thing, however, and were idling in Lucius’s

study. At the sound of Malfoy stepping out of the Floo, his mother and father immediately emerged.

Narcissa rushed forward.

She clung to Malfoy, pressing her lips to his temple. Malfoy froze.

He had forgotten how doting his mother had once been. Back in the other world, she'd been just an empty shell of a woman.

He lifted his hands to return her embrace.

"Mother," Malfoy said quietly. He kissed her cheek. "Don't fuss, I'm alright."

Lucius looked thin and gaunt. But otherwise no worse for the wear.

"Draco," he said. The look he gave his son was equal parts disapproving and impressed. "What a... flashy performance you put on. I hardly knew you had it in you."

Malfoy found it difficult to behave naturally around Lucius. His formerly dead father was standing before him, solid as anything. Malfoy's sanity—as it was wont to do these days—strained to comprehend what his eyes saw.

"Things worked out better this way," Malfoy said shortly, not looking directly at his father's face. "Don't you think?"

Lucius snorted but didn't answer. The proud old man.

"Leave him alone," Narcissa cut in, laying an impatient hand on her husband's arm. "He's safe. We all are. That's all that matters."

Malfoy watched Lucius hesitate, no doubt considering whether it would be worth his while to criticize his son's choice of actions.

But then he nodded.

Narcissa leaned her blonde head on Lucius's shoulder. And Malfoy watched as his parents' hands found each other, their fingers intertwining in an uncharacteristically open show of affection.

Malfoy hoped that some distant part of his mother's soul remembered that, in another world and place, she had been prepared to die to be reunited with her husband.

~

Crow had been placed in Narcissa's care while Malfoy was in Azkaban. Now that he was free, he found that he enjoyed the experience of having a pet.

Though not really a cat person, Malfoy found himself deeply attached to the small black kitten. Crow was the only other creature besides himself who had memories of their old reality, after all.

Although Crow seemed to tentatively enjoy the plentiful grounds and endless large rooms offered by the Manor, Malfoy had the sense that—like him—Crow didn’t quite like being back in a place that had been so different, in the other timeline. There was something unsettling about it. So when July rolled into August, Malfoy packed his and Crow’s things and relocated to a flat in London for the one remaining month before his final year at Hogwarts.

Malfoy was much happier living alone in the city, and Crow seemed to enjoy it more as well. The kitten—who was already much larger than he had been a month prior, growing lanky and long and glossy—especially loved perching on the sofa by the large floor to ceiling windows, looking out at the metropolitan lights.

There were good days and bad days.

Malfoy found it difficult to adjust to being *here*. His mind struggled with the shift in realities. And being the only person who remembered everything was even lonelier than he’d imagined.

Additionally, there was the fundamental change of the world going from a state of war to a state of peace. Malfoy often felt ill-suited for the idle, bland pleasantness of this life. And this feeling was certainly not helped by the return to Hogwarts.

Malfoy was still a soldier in his mind. A twenty-four year old man who had done and seen things no peacetime teenager could possibly comprehend. He felt a world apart from the cheery bustle of students that were now his peers.

For better or for worse, the other students in Malfoy’s year seemed to instinctively know there was something different about him. And plus—after the notoriety of his actions that had led to him in Azkaban and the war ending—most people preferred to watch him warily from a distance than interact.

The crowds at Kings Cross Station buzzed like a hive as Malfoy’s solitary figure crossed the station.

*He used six killing curses... I’m telling you, it’s impossible—*

*I hear he’s gone completely mad.*

*I hear he was tortured by You Know Who, and he snapped...*

Malfoy, unbothered, enjoyed an otherwise empty compartment on the Hogwarts express. Crow seemed fascinated by his first train ride. He stood with his two pink paws pressed to the glass, nose to the window, watching London fly past the window as the Hogwarts Express made its way into the countryside.

Malfoy propped his feet on the table and read a book, one eye on the compartment window in case a familiar head of curly brown hair passed.

Hermione didn't pass by, to Malfoy's disappointment. But only an hour or so into the ride, someone else barged in.

Pansy Parkinson ducked into the compartment, holding a compact mirror in one hand and a tube of lipstick in the other.

Malfoy just stared at her. His stomach made a now-familiar twist of confusion and uncertainty.

He had watched Pansy die, in the other world.

But Pansy looked alive and well now—her face bright and healthily rounded, her eyes wearing a characteristically fresh expression of scathing sarcasm as she turned to look at Malfoy.

"Pansy," Malfoy said. He gestured to the free seat across from himself. "Care to sit?"

"No, you pariah," she said crisply. "What the hell's gotten into you? Everyone says you're being odd as all hell."

Malfoy noticed with alert interest that Pansy—in stark contrast from every other Slytherin that had formerly been Malfoy's friend—seemed entirely at ease around him. He wondered if this was a vestige from their other world. If that last conversation they'd shared before her death still echoed somehow, in the unknowable vessel of the universe.

"It's really good to see you," he said finally.

"You're a fucking weirdo," Pansy snapped, but she smiled when Malfoy laughed.

"So," he said, unable to help himself. "You and Neville."

Pansy looked up so fast that she nearly lost her balance.

"What?" she asked in a high-pitched voice. Her normally pale cheeks were flushed. "What do you mean?"

"I think it's great," Malfoy said honestly. He leaned back in his seat. "Really. You seem happy."

Pansy looked like she didn't know whether to slap him or slink away.

Finally, she bit her lip, then her lips parted into a wide smile.

"Shut up," she advised him. "I don't want anyone to know."

"Mm. You two should go public."

“His friends hate me.”

“Fuck what they think.”

Pansy burst out into a laugh.

“God,” she said. “What *happened* to you?”

“Go on and find him,” Malfoy said, picking his book back up. “You’re standing at that door and looking out that window like you’re dying of thirst and the trolley’s coming. I’m guessing he’s meeting you in the loo?”

“Don’t go throwing around accusations,” Pansy said, her cheeks now crimson.

They looked at each other for a long moment—Pansy seemed unable to comprehend what was going on with Malfoy, which he supposed was fair.

Finally, Pansy fixed her hair in the window reflection and pulled the compartment door open.

“Don’t tell anyone,” she hissed, throwing him a haughty look. “My parents would—“

“Fuck them.”

Pansy opened her mouth, then closed it again. She stared at Malfoy.

She nodded, her eyes suddenly a little bright.

“Yeah,” she said. “You’re right. Fuck them.”

And then with a final hair fluff, she was off.

~

Being a student was intolerably,

unfathomably,

mind-numbingly,

boring.

It was bad enough that Malfoy had to endure going from a full-grown man to a lanky teenager. But at least *that* part of it he was able to remedy relatively quickly. He returned to his habit of early morning training and thrice weekly flying, and by the time winter rolled around he was at least close to being able to lift as much weight as he was used to.

No, much harder to tolerate was the simple lack of anything at all going on. Malfoy was accustomed to days full of fighting and strategy and sticky-sweet interactions with his endlessly pretty, petulant and enchanting Hermione. Now, there was just nothing to do at all.

Ever.

Malfoy tried to make up for the lack of action with time spent on the Quidditch pitch. He had always been a gifted flier, and with nothing else to do except tediously simple coursework, he increased his three days a week of flying to a full seven. Because of the marked increase in his skill and how regularly he could be found on the Quidditch field, Malfoy—to his chagrin—soon became something of a spectacle. He took to arriving at the Quidditch pitch at odd hours of the morning, to avoid giggling fifth years.

Flying was a nice break from reality.

Charging upwards in tight, spiraling helixes. Abruptly changing angles, falling into steep dives. Trying in vain to offer his mind some of the adrenaline that it was used to.

On Christmas, when most everyone had gone home for the holidays, Malfoy took advantage of the empty school grounds to fly for six hours straight. His mind was blank when he flew, which was a huge part of the appeal. In the air, he didn't dwell on the future-past, the other realities, or—worst and most painful of all—that aching absence in his life that had once been filled by a girl who no longer knew him at all.

Malfoy flew in tightening spirals up and up and up—as high into the sky as he could reach—until the air went thin and cold and Malfoy was as physically distant from the world as he felt.

When the broom handle started crystallizing with frost under his fingertips, Malfoy closed his eyes and let his body relax, then felt himself plummet down. He caught himself before he hit the ground, swirling away in a sharp, whistling corkscrew.

Catching his breath, Malfoy looked up through sweat-soaked hair and saw Hermione standing on the ground by the side of the pitch, watching him with her mouth slightly open.

Malfoy fought back a cocky surge of delight and flew in a low sweep around the pitch, then pulled up his broom short to look openly back at her. He smiled and gave a little wave of his gloved hand.

Hermione, who had evidently assumed she wasn't visible to him, turned pink and fumbled with her hair. She was clutching a book bag and soon started fiddling with that too, as though trying to make it seem like she'd been doing anything but watching Malfoy.

He smirked, watching her without embarrassment.

Under his unabashed gaze, Hermione seemed to nearly melt with awkwardness. She dropped her bag and had to pick it up again. Finally, not meeting Malfoy's eyes, she scurried away with the tips of her ears as red as carnations.

This was enough to fuel him for another three hours of jubilant flying.

Generally, Malfoy had to be satisfied with seeing Hermione only from a distance. After all, they had no relationship in this world yet. Not even a distant friendship. Their brief, distant moment of contact on the Quidditch pitch—far from sating Malfoy—only made him starve for her more acutely.

Malfoy told himself again and again that he shouldn't pursue her too aggressively yet, that he needed to lay a slow and patient layer of groundwork. This wasn't the lawless land of the other timeline. Here, it was normal life. Here—as with anyone else pursuing a romantic partner—Malfoy only had one real shot with her.

But—was it Malfoy's imagination?—Hermione seemed curious about him too.

Towards the end of winter, during a frosty early spring morning, Malfoy finished his daily morning exercise and lingered, as he always did, on the bridge overlooking the Great Lake.

He liked being outside in the cold. It was easier to remind himself that this was *real life*, not some strange dream, when he felt the bite of chilly air on his skin.

He leaned against the bridge bannister and watched his frosty breath plume out, then dissipate.

He cocked his head slightly to the side a moment later, when he heard a very familiar set of footsteps approach.

Pit-pat. Pit-pat.

They slowed as they passed him, and Malfoy smiled down at the water.

"Oh, Malfoy!" came Hermione's falsely surprised voice. "I didn't see you there. Hello."

Malfoy turned to direct his smile at her.

Hermione was dressed for the cold, and he tipped his head slightly to the side as he took in the sight of her clothing. She looked like a little winter doll—a long wool skirt embroidered with tree branches at the hem went all the way down to her ankles, under which the toes of her comfortably worn leather boots were visible. A red scarf, with two white pom-poms dangling from the end of it, was wound around her neck.

She was bright-cheeked and a little nervous-looking and nearly tottering under the weight of her book bag, which seemed to weigh nearly as much as she did.

"Good morning," Malfoy said. "I like your scarf. Cute."

"Oh!" She blushed and self-consciously touched one of the pom poms. "Thank you. I knit it myself."

Malfoy smiled at this new little fact about her, now hoarded away in his brain. Hermione liked knitting.

"Your wardrobe is a lot more fun than mine," he said.

Hermione looked at his clothing. Malfoy noticed with delight that her eyes lingered longer than they ought to have on his newly broad shoulders.

"Your clothes look perfectly fine," she mumbled, looking away from his torso.

Malfoy bit back a smile.

"Are you heading to an early class?" he asked.

"Yes—um, yeah. Advanced Runes."

"Mm," he hummed. The pom poms on her scarf looked soft, and Malfoy fought the urge to reach out and touch one. He slid his hands into his pockets and flicked his gaze back up to hers. "Better not be late, then."

Hermione seemed a little disappointed that their conversation was over. But she nodded quickly, cheeks pink, and mumbled a goodbye before rushing off. Her thick curly hair bounced with every little hurried step.

Malfoy watched her, the familiar mixture of longing and loneliness caught in his chest.

He sighed and turned again to stare at the Great Lake.

Slow progress, he reminded himself. Groundwork.

Malfoy let his head drop for a moment. He squeezed his eyes shut. Memories of her—of them curled in bed together, of his mouth on the soft skin of her throat, of the way her eyes went bleary and glassy when he touched her in just the right way...

They haunted him.

He stayed on the bridge until early morning turned into pale afternoon. Then, bored and alone, he returned to his quarters. Crow was waiting, curled in Malfoy's chair and purring. Malfoy scratched the kitten's head.

"You and me," he murmured. "Until we get your mummy back."

~

It wasn't always easy to maintain his self-discipline.

As weeks turned to months, Malfoy sometimes found himself wondering how bad it would *really* be, if he capitalized on Hermione's obviously but cautiously growing attraction to him.

But he always managed to quell his urge to drag her to bed and make her scream his name and then hoard her in his private quarters until she had no choice but to fall in love with him.

Mostly because he was starting to become concerned that he didn't even *know* how to win Hermione over in this world. She was different than she'd been in the war-torn version of things. Happier, brighter—more confident. He loved it all, loved being able to see how she flourished here. But it made him worry about the possibility that his undisguisable need for dominance would be unwelcome to her. Maybe she would find his affinity for control frightening.

There was another factor Malfoy was all too aware of, and that was Weasley.

Malfoy knew at a logical, intellectual level that he ought to let Hermione get her little schoolyard romance with Ron out of the way. They had too much history for such an outcome to not be inevitable. Let Weasley fill the role of Hermione's teenage fling, Malfoy thought. He himself had his sights set on the longer term.

But knowing something objectively was very different from remaining cool-headed when faced with the reality of it.

On a punishingly hot April afternoon, Malfoy—walking back to his quarters, broomstick in hand, sweat-drenched—saw Hermione and Weasley awkwardly holding hands in the courtyard.

The tide of possessive rage that came over Malfoy was unexpected and obliterating. He had become accustomed to the bland, even-keeled life of a student. There was no place in this world for the black fury of a soldier.

Malfoy's hand tightened on the handle of the broom until his knuckles cracked. He stared at Weasley and felt his vision narrow in on him like a tightening scope, the way it often had on the battlefield when he lunged towards a target, long ago.

Hermione and Weasley were too caught in the throes of puppy love to notice him. Weasley had her slim hand clutched in his clumsy paw, and Hermione—*Malfoy's* Hermione, his sweet, lovely, perfect girl—looked nervously pleased.

Malfoy watched them for only a second longer, then forced himself to walk away.

~

In the final week of term, all seventh years were tasked with filling out the forms that would determine their post-Hogwarts profession.

Malfoy had been absently trying to figure out what he wanted to do after school. And he found that the truth was, he simply didn't care. Just so long as his profession set him up to be near Hermione. His exam scores were good. He had nearly beat out Hermione for the spot of top of their class, but found to his amusement that she was still smarter and better than him, even this time around.

Like Malfoy, Hermione's school performance meant she had her pick of careers. And he knew through the gossip mill that she was deciding between two. A job in Runes Translation, and a job in Magical Creatures Justice. Both at the Ministry.

He glanced down at the parchment. All the Ministry job options looked so god damn tedious.

Well, all except one.

The irony was not lost on Malfoy as he circled:

*Auror:*

# Chapter 29

## Chapter Notes

Chapter count being very wobbly at the moment lol  
Enjoy <3 Love you <3

Hermione had these dreams, sometimes.

She never quite remembered the details, but always knew when one happened by the strange sense of disorientation she had upon waking.

There was no clear person or setting or even *incident* in these dreams. Just—shapes? Dark, blurry outlines of things. Like she was trying to see something happen through a thick sheet of water. And feelings. Mostly, a feeling of yearning.

They had been quite common when she was at Hogwarts, particularly in her final year, but since then she'd experienced them less and less.

This was a relief for multiple reasons. First: when she'd had these dreams in the past, Hermione sometimes felt confused and inexplicably morose in a way that lingered long past the morning. Second: given how often she and Ron were fighting these days—sometimes not finishing their row until two or three in the morning—Hermione was grateful for every minute of quality, dreamless sleep as she could get.

Their fight tonight was a bad one.

Ron had found, in Hermione's work bag, a draft of her grant proposal for the Runes Department to travel to the Athens Acropolis and excavate artifacts from the lost Water Temple.

"That proposal says you'd be gone for *three weeks*," he said, pointing at the offending little pile of papers he'd torn from her bag to slam onto the kitchen table. "Over Christmas! As though my family needed any other reason to think you're trying to avoid them—"

"It won't be over Christmas," Hermione said, on the verge of furious tears. "It's the end of December, Ron. I wouldn't be missing the holiday—"

"Three weeks? What kind of girlfriend up and leaves for three weeks during the winter holidays—"

"That's how long a dig site takes! I don't understand—how can you not be excited for me? This is what I've been trying to do for—"

"For what? All of—let's see—one and a half months? That's how long you've even been at the Ministry, Hermione, so don't try to make it seem like this is some lifelong goal..."

The row had not ended until Hermione stormed out of the kitchen and locked herself in their laundry room, where she slept on spare blankets so as to avoid being in the same room as him.

The next morning, she emerged to find a very contrite Ron making breakfast for her before she went off to the Ministry.

"I'm sorry, 'Mione. I just feel like three weeks is too long. That's reasonable, isn't it? You can find something that's—maybe—a week or two?"

Hermione tried to smile as she agreed that, yes, maybe she could find something shorter.

She tried to keep her thoughts about Ron strictly positive as she walked the short distance to work. The London street was crowded and bustling this morning, the early air crisp but softened with what promised to be a hot September sun.

Ron was a good boyfriend, in many ways, wasn't he? Hermione loved him. She did.

But they were experiencing growing pains far beyond what she might have expected. They were still a new couple—together for just under a year now—and in that time they had gone through so many life changes. Hogwarts ending, moving in together... Ron had started his job as assistant team manager at the Chudley Cannons in July, and—one month later—Hermione had started work at the Ministry.

And Hermione felt pretty sure that things had been going very well between them until she'd started work.

Distracted and miserable, Hermione accidentally bumped into a googly-eyed couple standing on the crowded sidewalk just outside a coffee shop.

"Oh! I'm so sorry—" Hermione said.

But the couple was oblivious to her. Kissing, with twin cups of takeaway coffee in their hands, enjoying every iota of the lovely fall morning. A cooling September breeze curled past them, whisking the woman's blonde hair into the man's face, and they both laughed.

Hermione found herself morosely envious of their obvious love.

The man looked entirely smitten.

It was with an increasingly wistful air that Hermione considered something she'd been trying not to think about. But, if she was being honest with herself, wasn't it a bit of a bad sign that there seemed to be so many things about her that Ron didn't like?

He didn't find her intense bookishness endearing, for instance. He didn't like how she could sometimes become too fixated on rules and structure. But she'd thought—hoped—that after everything they'd gone through together, he'd started to love those parts of her.

Instead, it seemed he had been feeling most warmly towards her in the sunset of their school years and before the sunrise of their adult years. Namely, the in-between window during which Hermione didn't have as much to be, well, especially *Hermione* about.

Now that she had work to do again, now that she had things to talk too much about, or books to spend too long lost in, or rules and regulations to be too attentive of...

Ron seemed to wish he could just wind back the clock to them being sun-drowsy seventh years. Or, even better (Hermione suspected), that he could wind back the clock just a month or two, to when he alone in their house had been the breadwinner, coming home in a slightly tipsy puff of importance to tell Hermione all about what he'd overheard the players saying to each other, or how so-and-so celebrity had been in the stands, this most recent match.

She was pretty sure he didn't like her making more money than him, also.

It wasn't until Hermione was stepping out of the Ministry lifts and onto the second floor (the coolly melodic woman's voice of the lift called out: '*Floor Two: Aurors Department, Runes Department, Floo Licensing*') that she realized she hadn't done a very good job of trying to think only positive things about Ron.

~

Most floors at the Ministry held anywhere from seven to ten different departments. Floor Two, though, was home to only three. Aurors, Runes and Floo. One might imagine the latter two departments being written in a much smaller font size. Floor Two only contained three departments because the Aurors Department was so large and well-funded that there had been only enough room leftover for two small departments after the Auror camp had been all set up.

Hermione loved her job in the Runes Department. And though her colleagues sometimes indulged in good-natured grumbling about how outnumbered they were by loud, brash Aurors, Hermione personally found it wonderful to share floor space with Magical Law Enforcement.

It was just—very exciting, wasn't it? Getting to see all those streams of uniformed witches and wizards strolling by. Sometimes, if it was the afternoon, people would even stumble out of the lift a bit injured. She didn't like seeing them hurt, but Hermione did find amusement in how resolutely Aurors seemed to believe that going to St. Mungo's was only for civilians. Once, Harry had hobbled out of the lift with a literal broken leg until Hermione had chastised him enough to go to hospital.

Yes, Hermione liked Aurors. They were effective and cool-headed and decisive, and she liked those qualities in a person.

Humming absently, she unloaded her bag of its papers, books and journals and arranged them on her desk. She found her now-slightly-crumpled grant proposal at the bottom of her bag and, after a moment, flattened it out onto the desk before her.

She was lost in thought, wondering about whether she ought to just tell Ron she was going and that was that, when there was an abrupt knock at her cubicle, shaking her from her reverie.

Auror Malfoy stood in the entrance, watching her.

“Oh!” Hermione jumped. “Malfoy, hi—”

Hermione’s hand made an involuntary, nervous movement towards her hair, as though to fix her curls—but she managed to stop the impulse just in time. She set her hands firmly in her lap instead, where they wouldn’t do anything embarrassing.

“Hi,” she said again, quickly. “Um—how are you?”

She and Malfoy had shared perhaps only a half dozen brief conversations in their first two months at the Ministry. He had never come to her cubicle before.

“Good,” Malfoy said with a smile. “Nice to see you. So this is where you sit...”

“Yes! Just by the lift. I see you walking—um—”

Hermione cleared her throat.

“I see you and all the Aurors walking by quite often,” she said quickly. “Going in and out, you know.”

Malfoy smiled. He took a slow step into her cubicle, looking around at her desk. He paused by the little row of leafy potted plants Hermione had arranged on the cubicle wall in front of her. He lifted his hand and gently brushed the heart-shaped leaf of her philodendron.

“It’s pretty in here,” he said quietly. He looked at her. “I like your plants.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said. She wondered if her voice sounded unusually high-pitched. “I have a lot of plants. They make me feel more comfortable.”

Malfoy made a little fond noise at this. He traced the stem of the philo with his thumb, then stepped back, returning to the doorway of her cubicle.

Hermione often got the impression that Malfoy was intensely aware of not overstepping. That he kept a finger always on the pulse of propriety, when it came to what he did or didn’t do around her.

She supposed it was that old-family, gentle breeding of his.

“Hope I’m not interrupting your work?” Malfoy asked. His calm grey eyes slid to the crumpled papers on her desk.

“Not at all! It’s good to see you. You’ve certainly been making a splash!”

Malfoy had just been announced as the winner of the annual Auror rookie sparring tournament, where he'd gone undefeated against the thirteen other new recruits. Harry had nursed a broken nose and sworn liberally about *that god damn ferret* in the wake of his own defeat.

"You too," he said with a smile. "I heard your department's dig site permit for Athens is making good progress."

Hermione paused, surprised. How had he heard about that?

"I was just chatting about it to Berkon," Malfoy explained, as though hearing her unspoken question.

"Oh! Berkon's the best. We're lucky to have him as Department Head."

"He says great things about you."

Hermione smiled, pleased by the knowledge that her boss liked her. She fiddled eagerly with her sleeve, and Malfoy's eyes dropped to clock the movement. He smiled.

"You like doing a good job," he noted mildly.

"Yes! Doesn't everyone?"

"Of course." He looked at her a moment longer, then cleared his throat. "Actually, that's why I'm here. I was telling Berkon I could use Runes help with a case, and he suggested you."

"Oh! Wow—an Auror case involving Runes? That's not common."

"I thought so too," Malfoy said, smiling at her enthusiasm. "It's been at a dead end for a while, but they were going through the pile of old cases for the rookies, I suppose—so now it's on me."

"Well, I'd be happy to help if I can."

Malfoy had been holding a plain white folder of documents. He lifted it, as though to show her, then took the few relaxed steps towards her to set the folder onto her desk. Like he wanted to be sure he didn't scare her.

"Here," he said. "I'll show you. It's interesting, actually—I think you might enjoy working on it."

He was leaning over her slightly, his arm extending just past her shoulder to flip open the folder. Hermione stared, as though hypnotized, at the slow, sure moments of his hands as he carefully spread out the documents. His fingers looked strong and deft. His knuckles were defined. There was something deeply comforting about the sight of his large hands.

She blinked, realizing Malfoy was asking her something.

“God, sorry,” she said, rubbing her forehead. “I just—spaced. Can you repeat what you were saying?”

Malfoy paused.

“Are you tired?” he asked evenly.

His tone was strangely intense, and Hermione looked up to find his face tipped down, watching her. His grey eyes were slightly in shadow. For some reason, he glanced at her hands.

“No! No, not at all,” Hermione said quickly. She didn’t want him to think she was too overworked to be able to do a good job on the case. “I’m fresh as a daisy. Promise.”

He assessed her, then blinked and seemed to acquiesce. He smiled a little.

“Alright,” he said. “Well—it’s a drug trafficking case. Fairly straightforward. But they’re good at covering their tracks as far as evidence goes, so I’m looking for the site of their headquarters. They’ve been sending messages in code. I included a copy here, let me see...”

Malfoy leaned over a little further. No part of him touched her—she was convinced he was too proper to ever do anything like touch a coworker—but Hermione felt the heat of his large body, through his robes. She could almost imagine the bubble of her personal space, being pressed flush to his.

“Here it is.” Malfoy slid one of the papers closer to her.

Hermione’s eyes widened. She leaned forward, the better to see the copied messages.

“Oh, wow,” she breathed. “Really odd stuff. It looks like they’ve made up their own encryption system? I definitely recognize some of the Rune symbols here, but others seem to be adapted...”

She pulled the folder closer to her and began thumbing through the rest of the pages.

After a while, she realized Malfoy was still standing just over her. His hand was resting on the back of her chair.

Immediately, Malfoy—as though alert to any possible sign of her discomfiture—casually let go of her chair and stepped back. Returning space between them. Even though Hermione had not minded the proximity.

“I can just leave those with you,” he said. “And you can look at them at your own pace. Assuming you’re interested.”

“Definitely,” Hermione said firmly.

The Rune system looked fascinating—and the idea of being able to help out on an Auror case was exciting.

Malfoy left the rest of the folder with her and thanked her again before leaving. She sat up a little taller to watch over the top of her plants as he left and strolled back over to the Aurors Department.

Hermione exhaled.

She looked down at the case notes with a little smile, happy to get started.

~

The Rune Translations took her the better part of three days, but the time flew by. The messages were using some sort of advanced coding system and—in typical Hermione fashion—there was nothing more compelling to her than a difficult problem. She eventually realized that the encryption used a mixture of Ancient Runes and muggle hieroglyphs.

Once she connected those dots, the formerly indecipherable messages revealed themselves to her like the rainbow casting of a prism, appearing fully only at the exact right angle of light. There was no feeling more satisfying.

Hermione finished up notating her findings, taking care to apply alphabetized tabs where necessary, then organized her work into a little blue folder to bring to Malfoy.

The Auror's side of the building was loud and boisterous, in stark contrast with the bookish dignity of the Runes Department. Witches and wizards walked swiftly past her, their strides fast and impatient. They stood over the walls of each other's cubicles, comparing interrogation notes or arguing loudly about which theory felt more likely.

Hermione passed Harry and Neville, who were holding cups of water by the kitchenette and discussing Neville's upcoming wedding. Harry was the best man—and Hermione knew from a number of conversations with him that he was nervous about the responsibility, but determined to do the very best job he could. His found family meant everything to him.

The thought brought to mind—unwelcome—the reminder that *that* was yet another reason she and Ron ought to stay together. They had so much history. And did she really want to be responsible for creating a schism in their trio...?

She rounded a corner just then and saw Malfoy's familiar tall frame. He was walking out of a meeting room with a small group of other Aurors. He looked bored absolutely senseless.

The expression was incongruous and funny to see on his usually unreadably serious face, and Hermione caught herself smiling as she waved to get his attention.

Malfoy's face immediately brightened into transparent pleasure at the sight of her. He made his way to her, a little smile curling the corners of his mouth.

"All done already?" he asked, eyeing the folder in her hands.

The chaotic environment suddenly seemed very comfortable, with the steady and tall form of Auror Malfoy standing before her.

“I am!” Hermione said happily. She handed him the folder. “I just wrapped up. Wanted to get it to you as soon as I could.”

Malfoy took one hand out of his pocket to take the documents from her.

Someone walked by with a warmed chocolate croissant just then—the rich smell of butter and cocoa reached Hermione. She turned to find the source of the smell. It looked like Pansy was visiting Neville at work. She was holding a plate of pastries from home, trotting up to her fiancé, who was smiling at her like she hung the moon.

Hermione gazed wistfully at both the couple and at the dessert.

“Sweet tooth?” Malfoy hummed quietly, looking up from the papers to give her a little smile.

“Yes,” she admitted. “I can’t resist a good dessert. And those two are so adorable, aren’t they...”

Malfoy’s eyes were on Hermione. His clear silver gaze was intense and tender. But then he just nodded and looked back down at the paper.

“Wow,” he said. He flipped through the documents. “You work quickly. This is amazing.”

Hermione waited with a smile as he looked through the papers. She noticed that the other Aurors appeared to be giving Malfoy a wide berth, and wondered which of them had been among the four who were unfortunate enough to have been knocked unconscious in the sparring competition.

“Hieroglyphs,” Malfoy said softly, his eyes running down the page. “Very clever of you to try that.”

“Thank you,” she said, beaming. “I guess they didn’t think anyone in the wizarding world would think to try muggle pictographs. But it’s all decrypted now. I hope it helps you catch them.”

“It will. Thank you. You did an excellent job.”

Hermione positively glowed under the warmth of his gentle praise.

She smiled all the way back to her desk, feeling proud of having helped out.

Working with Malfoy was *so enjoyable*. He was smart and confident and unusually verbal about his appreciation.

Hermione liked all those qualities in a colleague. Very much.

She went home that evening in a good mood and determined not to fight with Ron.

Hermione was an overperformer, a perfectionist, a hard worker—and she didn't like failing at anything. Especially not her relationship.

So she got home early and made fresh clam linguine and uncorked a bottle of oaky Chardonnay to surprise her boyfriend with. When Ron got home, he sniffed the air appreciatively before dropping his bag by the door.

"Smells *great* Hermione," he called.

Hermione smiled happily.

"I thought I'd make us dinner," she said, untying her red apron from behind her back. "Friday and all. Come on and sit. Let's eat, everything's just got done..."

Ron gave her a kiss and dropped with a beleaguered groan into the chair.

"You wouldn't believe the day I had," he said, reaching across the table to grab himself a piece of garlic bread. Hermione had been halfway to lifting her glass for a toast but she quickly lowered it, sensing Ron was hungry and wanted to get right to eating.

"What happened?" she asked. "Here—gimme your plate, I'll get you salad..."

"Well. Guess who walks into our training pitch at lunch."

"Um—who?"

"Edwin Sandoval! The Falmouth Falcon's top recruit last year. And he wanted to come see our pitch and meet the team!"

Ron shoveled noodles into his mouth.

"I got to say hello," he said. "And I could tell he really liked me."

"That's so exciting! Are you thinking he'll join the team?"

"Oh, God, Hermione. I dunno how to even answer that, I mean there's so many complex factors. It's not really a simple question..."

Hermione nodded politely and with a look of focused interest on her face while Ron proceeded to talk nonstop for the rest of dinner. Afterwards, he offered to do the dishes with the same air as a soldier offering to be the first to run into fire.

"You're the best," Ron said that night, as they cuddled in bed. "Really, 'Mione. Just the best."

He kissed her cheek, then her mouth. He looped his arms around her waist and Hermione felt one of his hands start to wander up her shirt.

"Oh," Hermione said quickly. "Ron—no, I'm too tired. Please—maybe tomorrow?"

"Course," he said, removing his hands from her breasts. He gave her another kiss on the cheek. "Goodnight. Love you."

"Love you too."

Ron yawned and rolled to his side. He was asleep within minutes, but Hermione sat awake a while longer, staring up at the ceiling.

Finally, she sighed and turned her bedside lamp off.

In the cool dark of the bedroom, her thoughts started to wander. After a moment's hesitation, Hermione quietly slid her hand down the front of her underwear. She tried not to move too much, so as not to wake Ron.

The first brush of her fingers made her shiver.

Her imagination always took her to the same scenario when she wanted to come quickly. A favorite fantasy in which the tall, broad silhouette of an unknown man stood over her.

In a low, calm voice, the faceless stranger told her: *do as I say*.

Hermione's hand worked a little faster as she imagined large fingers squeezing her face, holding her jaw open. His thumb would slide into her mouth, and he would press down on her tongue.

He would kiss her neck, then carefully crawl on top of her. With his weight on her, holding her down, he would hiss obsessive endearments into her ear. She would squirm under him, and that would make him groan quietly—and, and—

Hermione's tightly squeezed eyes fluttered open as she came with a silent shudder.

Once the pleasure subsided, Hermione sleepily removed her hand from between her legs. She dozed off, feeling partially relieved and yet also lonelier than before.

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On Monday, the whole Ministry was abuzz.

Hermione was nearly trampled as she stepped out of the Floo in the Atrium—everyone was in animated discussion about the same thing, too distracted to pay attention to where they were walking.

There were discarded copies of the *Prophet* everywhere, and Hermione snagged one to see what all the fuss was about.

As it turned out, Auror Draco Malfoy had delivered all five leaders of the cross-continent drug trafficking ring to the Ministry in one fell swoop. The headquarters of the crime organization had turned out to be in Berlin, where Malfoy was presently en route back from, now that it had been stripped for evidence.

Malfoy's short, to-the-point summary report on the matter had credited Translator Granger with pivotal support in the case.

The Runes Department was unaccustomed to being in the spotlight, and Hermione was stopped multiple times on the way to her desk by giddy Translators who wanted to congratulate her and hear all the details.

By the time she actually did arrive at her cubicle, Hermione was quite infected by everyone's jubilant mood. She was eager to read Malfoy's full report, which she'd heard he'd not yet turned in yet, but that the Minister himself was eagerly anticipating.

But Malfoy, it seemed, had better things to do than complete paperwork.

Hermione put her bag down by her chair. There was a small box waiting for her on her desk.

The box was white and had a looping red satin bow affixed to its front. Hermione tugged at the ribbon to open the box. It was a pastry container, and in it was a slice of cherry cake.

It was stylishly delicate, and seemed composed primarily of shattered pieces of dark chocolate arranged over pink and red speckled frosting. Atop it all was a syrupy pile of ruinously beautiful scarlet cherries, dripping artfully down the side and onto the white doily under the cake.

Printed on the doily was the name of what had to be a German bakery: *Honig und Sahne*.

There was a card with the cake, and Hermione—smiling and baffled—opened it to read the contents.

In clean, sharp handwriting:

*Hermione,*

*Thank you for your help. I think we make a good team.*

*Saw this in a bakery window while I was in Berlin and decided to bring it home to you.*

*- Draco*



# Chapter 30

## Chapter Notes

<3 mwah mwah

Hermione was deeply touched by Auror Malfoy's gift.

The cake was beautiful. Too pretty to eat. And the fact that he'd picked it up for her in Berlin? So thoughtful.

For the rest of the morning, Hermione sat up a little taller to look over her cubicle wall anytime she heard the ding of the lift. And finally, just after lunch, the sliding brass doors opened and Auror Malfoy stepped out.

To Hermione's alarm, he appeared to be slightly injured. His normally smooth, long stride was interrupted by a subtle limp, and one side of his face bore a cross-hatch of red scars, stretching from his cheekbone to under his jaw.

She'd heard there had been combat in Berlin, but somehow hadn't expected to see any evidence of them on the ever-polished Malfoy.

But the injuries didn't seem to bother him. Malfoy looked as calm as ever. He stepped out of the elevator, one hand in his pockets and the other gesturing as spoke with a man Hermione recognized as Head Auror Ang.

She sank a little lower behind her cubicle wall, figuring she'd just need thank Malfoy later, when he wasn't in conversation with his boss. But only a few steps out of the lift, his grey eyes wandered over to her desk. Looking for her.

He smiled when he realized she'd already been watching him.

Malfoy said something to Auror Ang, and then they were both coming her way.

"Good morning," Malfoy said, coming to a stop by her cubicle. He leaned against the frame. "We were just talking about your help on the case."

Ang was a sturdy-looking older man with tan skin, bright white hair and friendly smile lines. He gave Hermione a firm handshake.

"Malfoy tells me your work on the case was really quite brilliant," Auror Ang said in a booming, jovial voice. "Hieroglyphs, yes?"

"Yes! Thank you very much," Hermione gushed. "It was a fascinating one to work on."

"We have a few other coded message cases that have sat cold for years," Ang said. "Maybe we can get your eye on those sometime. Would be great to finally close them out."

"Oh, I'd be happy to! Any time, really!"

Hermione shot Malfoy an ecstatic look, filled to the brim with pride. He smiled back.

"Ang—I'll have the report done by end of day," Malfoy said. "I just need to get some notes from Hermione."

"Perfectly fine," Ang said, clapping Malfoy on the back. "Nice work on this one, son. I'll talk to Case Management about your next assignment. Or you can take your pick from the cold batch again."

Ang assured Hermione once more that her help would be welcome anytime, then walked away. He was almost immediately brought into another conversation with a passing group of Aurors.

Hermione waited until he was out of earshot before turning, stricken, to Malfoy.

"Did I forget to attach some of the notes?" she whispered, mortified. "I'm so sorry, I didn't realize you were delaying your report because of me..."

"Oh, no—you're good," he laughed. "Just wanted an excuse to get a break from being at my desk."

"Thank goodness." Hermione was dizzy with relief at not having been the reason his report was delayed. "You had me worried."

"Very sweet of you to be concerned," he said, directing his attention back down to give her a fond smile.

Malfoy's grey eyes wandered over her clothes, her hands and the various objects on her desk, in that order. He paused to take in the pink laces on her white boots, and then again at the sight of some framed photos of her and Harry and Ron on her desk.

Hermione found her gaze drawn again to the red scars on his cheek.

"Those look like they hurt," she said quietly. He met her eyes. "Did you get them in Berlin?"

Auror Malfoy touched the edge of the red scar, as though he'd forgotten it was even there.

"Mm? Oh, it's nothing. Run of the mill." Then he made a general sort of gesture towards the rest of his face. "I've got plenty of them."

"Plenty of what?"

"Scars."

Hermione examined his face, confused.

Clean-shaven, sharp jaw. Straight eyebrows. Malfoy had no other scars.

He seemed to realize what she was confused about.

"Ah—they all heal sooner or later," he said, averting his gaze. "Is what I meant."

"Oh, yes, of course. But—um—maybe you ought to put Dittany on them just in case? Better to prevent the scarring, if you can help it..."

Auror Malfoy looked unexpectedly impacted by this statement. He searched her face—though for what, Hermione didn't know.

"I will," he said finally. His voice was a little strained. "Thank you for your concern."

Hermione smiled.

"I, um... wanted to thank you for the cake," she said, glancing at the white box on her desk. Her stomach did a happy little flip anytime she looked at it. "It's really beautiful. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Malfoy said, moving a little closer to look at the box. His hand came to rest casually on the desk next to her. "Is everything alright with it? Looks like you haven't had any yet."

"I just feel like it's too pretty to cut into," she admitted with a laugh. "I've been controlling myself all day."

"Ah," he said, looking amused. "Don't do that."

Hermione smiled widely.

"Okay, you've convinced me. I'll have some now. Do you want to split it with me?"

"I'm fine. Not a big fan of sweets. But if it's alright, I'll stay and chat to see how you like it."

"Of course! I'll probably bring this other half home, then... Ron might like it. He always—"

"You know what," Malfoy cut in smoothly. "I think I will have a slice."

"Oh!" Hermione was surprised but not displeased by his sudden change of mind.

Malfoy stepped into her cubicle. There was another chair there, though Hermione had set a potted ficus on the unused seat. Malfoy lifted the plant with one hand and slid it onto the filing cabinet before pulling the now-free chair close to Hermione with a firm drag of his black leather boot.

He sat down much closer than she'd expected him to. Thinking that maybe Malfoy was going for proximity to the cake, Hermione rolled her own chair further away to make room for him. But Malfoy's hand darted out with surprising speed to grip the arm of her chair, stopping it so abruptly in its tracks that Hermione swayed shortly. He dragged her chair back towards him.

"Oh, you can stay there," he said politely. "I've got plenty of space."

"Alright," she said, giving him a smile. She returned to focusing on the cake, trying to find the right spot to cut the slice in half with her fork.

"You'll never believe this," Hermione said. "But cherry cake is my favorite dessert. Even though it's not that common. So this was a really lucky guess."

"Wow, yes. That is lucky."

Hermione slid her half of the cake onto her paper plate and offered the rest of the box to Auror Malfoy.

"Oh," she said, glancing around her desk. "I've only got this one fork. Hang on a sec, I'll get you another from the kitchenette."

"It's fine. Eat."

The words were gentle but unmistakably firm. Malfoy stretched a leg lazily out, barring Hermione from leaving.

She was secretly relieved. She was starving, and wanted to taste a bite of that pink frosting as soon as possible. Hermione settled back into her chair and dug in.

It was so light and creamy. At her first bite, Hermione had to stop herself from making a noise of exuberant delight. But her face must have given her joy away, because Malfoy laughed.

"Good?" he asked.

"Oh, God. So good."

"I'm glad."

He watched with fond patience as Hermione ate the rest of her cake. She saved the cherries for last, so she could drag them through the leftover frosting.

"I can't believe how delicious that was. You really need to try yours. Let me get you a fork  
—"

"Just give me yours."

"Oh, um?"

She offered her fork automatically, though there was still frosting on the tines. Maybe he would cast a Cleaning Charm on it?

But Malfoy didn't bother cleaning it. He licked the stray frosting off the tines, then took a bite of his cake as though the fork was good as new.

Hermione was slightly taken aback, but then she supposed it was very—practical and utilitarian to not mind sharing silverware? Maybe Aurors in general cared less about such little things, given the more pressingly violent concerns of their day-to-day.

"This is good," Malfoy remarked mildly, drawing her out of this thought.

"It really is," Hermione agreed. She searched for her water bottle, thirsty now after all the sugar. "I'm glad you're eating the other half. I'm not sure it would have survived the trip home with me."

She took a sip of water, then fumbled the cap to her bottle as she tried to twist it back on. It rolled under her desk and Hermione ducked down to look for it.

"Home to Ron," came Malfoy's politely cool voice from above the desk.

"Yes, that's right," she said. The bottle cap was just next to Malfoy's large boot. "We moved in together in June..."

She reached past Malfoy's leg to pick up the cap, and her hand brushed the stiff fabric of Malfoy's trousers. At the contact, his body tensed slightly. He carefully moved, perhaps to try to shift out of her way, but succeeded only in prolonging their contact. Hermione's hand was nearly pressed to his leg when she finally succeeded in picking up the cap.

"Sorry," Hermione chirped, resurfacing a little breathlessly. She cast a Cleaning Charm on the cap before screwing it back on. She fixed her hair, which had fallen in her face.

"No problem," he said calmly, biting into a cherry. "So. How have things been going since June?"

"Oh. Um—with the flat?"

"No. With Ron."

The cubicle was entirely silent for a moment.

That was a bit of a strange question, wasn't it? But Malfoy's expression was only politely curious, so Hermione just cleared her throat and tried to answer.

"It's—great. Well, um, it's... it's okay. You know. It's not bad."

She trailed off, but Malfoy didn't speak to fill the silence. He just waited. Like he wanted her to say more. Hermione found she didn't want to disappoint him—she enjoyed Malfoy's gentle approval, after all, so she continued talking.

"Well, we moved in together in June," she said again. What other talking points about her relationship did she usually give? "Um—our first time living together. So. Just some normal growing pains."

"What kind of growing pains?"

"Well, you know. Kind of like people always say—you think you know someone, but there's all sorts of things you don't learn until you share space day and night with them..."

She trailed off, thinking.

"It's been, maybe, a little hard," she admitted.

Hermione then felt immediately guilty for sharing something negative about her boyfriend. Especially to another man.

"Sorry," she said quickly. "I didn't mean—I'm no walk in the park either, I'm sure."

Malfoy had been entirely still, listening carefully to her speak. But at this final remark, an uncharacteristic flicker of agitation sparked through him. His hand was on the desk, and his fingers twitched. He straightened his posture and dropped his hand restlessly into his lap.

"You shouldn't say that about yourself," he said quietly.

Something new and serious lurked at the soft edges of his words.

Hermione cleared her throat nervously.

"Thanks," she said, looking down at her hands, folded in her lap. "Um. Anyway. Why do you ask? Thinking of moving in with someone?"

For some reason, this made him laugh a little.

"Maybe one day," he said. "But I have to be careful with who I bring home. My cat's wary of strangers."

Hermione perked up with immediate interest. Draco Malfoy had *a cat*?

"I never knew you were a cat person!"

Malfoy smiled. His eyes traced her face, softening as they took in the full glow of her smile.

"Yeah," he said finally. "You like cats?"

"I love them. I've got one—Crookshanks—at home, but he's gotten sort of wild and feral. An outdoors guy. I miss when he was smaller and liked to cuddle."

"I think I know what you mean."

"Is yours cuddly?"

"Oh, yes. He's always crawling all over me."

It was hard to imagine Auror Malfoy getting cuddly with anything, but the image delighted nonetheless.

"He sounds lovely," Hermione said. "What's his name?"

"Crow."

Something about the name triggered a slow, distant thrum of fondness in Hermione.

It rose from her stomach to her chest, where it bloomed outwards. Like a deep subterranean rumble, surfacing into a gentle earthquake.

*Crow.*

"Wow," she breathed. "I—really like that name. So cute. How did you choose it?"

"I actually can't remember," he said, looking at her. There was a barely perceptible little twist of sadness in his voice. "But it is a good name, isn't it? I've always liked it."

"Definitely. Is Crow a black cat?"

"Yes. But he's got a little pink nose."

"Oh, Malfoy—he sounds perfect. I'd love to see a photo, if you have one?"

Malfoy smiled and toyed with the edge of her desk.

"You know, I don't," he said apologetically. "But I'll tell you what... why don't you just come over to mine and meet him sometime?"

"Oh," Hermione managed to say. "Um..."

Malfoy stood slowly, sliding his hands in his pockets. He looked down at Hermione, his smile warm. He seemed so tall, standing over her like this. If he was aware of how taken-aback she was—or of how unusual this invitation was—he gave no sign of it.

"If you miss cuddles, I mean," he said mildly. "Crow would be happy to oblige. Just let me know. I'll sort you out anytime you like."

~

On Wednesday, the Runes Department's grant proposal for the Athens dig site was approved. A Korean Runes team that had been at the Athens Acropolis the week prior had discovered some major artifacts, which had caught the attention of researchers in London.

The permit was expeditiously given the green light, and the original timeline of December was bumped up to next week.

As she giddily lifted a plastic cup of sparkling apple cider with her equally-jubilant teammates, Hermione decided right then and there she was going on the trip. This was a critical opportunity for her career. She would just need to bite the bullet and tell Ron she had to go, even if it led to the biggest row of their entire relationship.

Which was just as well, because it did.

“I thought we talked about this!” Ron shouted. He was standing at the kitchen table, where they’d been in the middle of eating Chinese take out when Hermione had broached the subject. “You said you’d find a shorter trip!”

He’d knocked over a container of rice in his abrupt rise to his feet. Hermione felt bizarrely like the spilled rice was exactly like this fight they were having. Messy and impossible to cleanly put back in the box.

“No,” Hermione said, shaking. “That’s what *you* said. This is important to me, Ron. Please be okay with this. Please support me. I need to know you’re on my side—”

“I’m *not!* And the fact that you want to go anyway, I can’t believe—”

“I’m working in the Runes Department, so whether you like it or not I’m going to have to go on an excavation site eventually! And it’s not over Christmas anymore, so I thought you’d be happier!”

Ron’s face had been magenta, but now it was turning furiously pale. He looked angrier than she’d ever seen him.

He seemed to be deciding whether or not to say something.

Finally, he did.

“Three weeks is a long time,” he said through gritted teeth. “Is there someone you’re trying to spend three weeks overnight with? At work?”

“You think I’m *having an affair?*” Hermione asked, disbelieving. “Are you serious?”

“I saw in the paper you helped Malfoy with a case. You didn’t think to mention—“

“It’s my job, Ron! Berkon recommended me for it specifically! And, not that you care, but I did excellent work on it!”

“Malfoy wants to fuck you,” Ron spat.

The silence after this was ringing.

Hermione felt, suddenly, like she might slap Ron.

“I’ve always felt it,” Ron hissed, the words flowing freely now, like poison. “I could tell since school. Probably some fucking Gryffindor swot fantasy he has. Or because he still hates me, he’s always looked down on me—“

The words felt like razors, slicing Hermione. For more reasons than one.

“Let me make sure I understand,” Hermione breathed, feeling dizzy. “You saw that I was credited in a major Runes case, and your first thought was that it must be because Malfoy

wanted to shag me.”

“Don’t *twist my words*—“

“And,” Hermione continued, feeling distant and eerily calm. “Your next thought was that you think he wants to shag me because I’m a Gryffindor swot. Or, perhaps, because of you. Those are the two possible explanations.”

Ron’s freckles stood out like a stark spray of dried blood on his face. His skin was white and his eyes hard with anger.

“Alright, yeah,” Ron hissed. “So what if that’s what I’m saying?”

Things began to click quietly into place for Hermione now. She was so cold with shock and misery that she felt almost transcendently distant from her own life. She floated high above herself, above her and Ron, above their little kitchen. So high that she could see the next few hours. The next few days. The next few years. Like her future with Ron was a jumble of puzzle pieces that was starting to come together.

And Hermione didn’t like the picture.

“Can I ask you something?” she asked faintly.

“What?” Ron snapped.

“How come it seems that out of everyone I know,” Hermione said. “It’s my own boyfriend that respects me the least?”

Ron opened his mouth, then closed it.

Hermione could relate.

Because considering how much there still was to yell about, it was funny how there didn’t really seem to be anything left to say.

~

The one good thing about packing all of her things and moving out of the flat that night was that it meant Hermione had substantially less packing to do for the trip to Athens.

Although the official start date wasn’t for one week, Hermione had nowhere to stay here in London. Harry and Ginny were good friends, but both had stronger loyalties to Ron than they did to her. In the bleeding aftermath of the breakup, Hermione knew she would be foolish to ask to stay with them.

She calmly got a room at the Leaky Cauldron, knowing that shock was dulling the inevitable but currently blessedly numbed onslaught of emotion.

Hermione sat on the bed silently, surrounded by her four suitcases and three boxes of things.

She didn't get very much sleep.

But right before she did finally doze off, Hermione was visited once more by the fantasy of the tall, dominant man. He was soft with empathy for her this time, but no less smoothly commanding.

And Hermione considered—with morose but welcome hope—that maybe her new singlehood would give her the courage to pursue the kind of relationship she had always craved but never experienced.

~

The next day at the Ministry passed in a sleepy, willfully numb blur.

She blinked heavily at her desk. Berkon and a few of her other colleagues asked if she was alright, so noticeable was her unusual demeanor.

“I’m fine,” she assured them, trying to smile as brightly as possible. She could hardly remember what her normal behavior was like. “I am. Thank you.”

Hermione was starting to feel like she couldn’t bear being here.

She didn’t want to answer questions. She didn’t want to tell anyone yet about her breakup.

When she fielded the sixth “are you *sure* everything’s alright?” of the day, Hermione decided to talk to Berkon.

“I wanted to ask if I could head to the dig site early,” Hermione said, standing before the Department Head’s desk. “I know it doesn’t officially start until next week. But I—I’m just going through some things here, and it would really help me if I could start early, before the rest of the Department gets there.”

Berkon looked worried about her. Hermione knew he had two daughters, and felt—from the consternated furrow in his forehead—that his paternal sense of concern had been activated.

“Hermione,” he said. “Are you alright?”

“I am,” she rushed to say. “I am, really. It’s just a temporary situation. I’m sorry to ask for the special accommodation...”

“I have no problem with you starting early,” Berkon said. “But—the primary issue is it can be a bit unsafe at the dig site. Rock falls, and—the Athens Acropolis is known to have issues with artifact robbers. The terms of the permit from the Ministry are that the Department goes all together. And even with that, they assigned Aurors to accompany us. I’m not sure you’ll be allowed to go without those conditions met.”

Hermione knew her face must have fallen.

Berkon gave her a sympathetic frown.

“Let me talk to the Minister,” he finally said. “Maybe we can see if there’s an Auror who’d be willing to go early with you.”

# Chapter 31

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Although Malfoy had never subscribed to the belief he was “insane” (as Hermione had often said, especially early on), he knew he was not a normal sort of man.

But Hermione had come to like this about him by the end, he thought. Once she’d melted like warmed honey on him, seeping into him and softening his soul in ways he hadn’t known were possible. She’d come to see the value in a man who was single-mindedly focused, whose affection bordered—if not embodied—obsession.

And though the clock had turned back and shaped the world into something safer, less dark, the fact was that—unlike everyone else—Malfoy was the same man he’d been before.

In other words, he was running dangerously low on patience.

His self-control was shaved down to a splinter. A snap away from nothing. He had come all of this way, after all, hadn’t he? He had spun and unspun the fabric of fate to pool it in loose golden threads at Hermione’s feet. He wanted to tighten them around her now like a net, drag her to him like she was a mermaid caught at sea.

He wanted her back. He *needed her back*.

But still, he waited. Because Hermione had told him—once, in another life—that she wanted a *normal* love story. One with flat shopping and laundry. A normal husband who didn’t storm in and steal her away simply because he didn’t believe in waiting.

So Malfoy waited.

And on August 12th—two months into being an Auror and, frankly, not a moment too soon—his patience was rewarded.

Case Management distributed a memo to the entire Aurors Department. It read:

*Call for extra staffing—Runes Department convoy—Athens Acropolis. Auror needed for early departure, accompanying Translator H. Granger; remaining on site through August 25th. Second Auror to join on Monday.*

By the time Malfoy read the memo, the Auror slot had apparently already been filled by McLaggen.

Malfoy wrote a brief note directly to Head Auror Ang, trying not to think about what he’d have to resort to if the polite method of getting his way failed.

*Put me on for the Athens convoy, please. Have always wanted to visit.*

The universe seemed to speak through Ang's response:

*No problem. You've earned it.*

~

One kind of funny thing was that Malfoy had never owned a pair of sunglasses before.

Shades were a decidedly muggle accessory, meaning that back in the other timeline he had never had reason nor opportunity to don a pair. But muggle fashion had become very popular in this version of things.

And, of course, Athens was very sunny in August.

Malfoy stepped out of the crowded Portkey station and into the hot Mediterranean morning. Sweat instantly started forming on his neck. He looked up at the lapis lazuli sky, which appeared shimmery and teal through the black lenses of his sunglasses, then off to the side where a large group of British visitors were idling on the brick-top courtyard, looking at maps and snapping photos of each other.

Hermione wasn't here yet. She was running a little late.

Malfoy set his bag down on the ground, then took a seat on the stone bench and watched, through pleasantly darkened lenses (these Muggles really had been onto something with this tinted eyewear), the front doors of the Portkey station.

Three groups of travelers from three different Portkeys came and went in succession without sign of Hermione. By the third, Malfoy was nearly crawling out of his skin with worry. Finally, at half past noon, Hermione burst through the doors.

She looked exhausted and uncharacteristically disheveled. Her shirt was wrinkled, her hair up in a lopsided bun. She cast her eyes frantically over the waiting area, and when she caught sight of Malfoy her mouth actually wobbled.

She rushed forwards, dragging a heavy bag along. Malfoy cast rapid glances up and down her for signs of injuries. An outdated but unbreakable habit.

"I'm so sorry," she stammered at once. "I overslept—were you waiting long?"

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Are you alright?"

Up close, it was clear Hermione wasn't doing well. There were dark shadows under her eyes, which looked pink-rimmed and a little swollen.

"I'm fine," she said, rubbing her face. "I feel so stupid! Berkon said you'd had to be pulled off your other projects to accompany me. And here I am, hours late—I was staying at the Leaky Cauldron and I just slept so poorly—"

*Staying at the Leaky Cauldron?* A fierce rush of hope coursed through Malfoy.

“Did something happen?” he asked. Then, recklessly: “Did Ron do something?”

But Hermione’s eyes shuttered. Malfoy got the impression she’d been fielding this question often, and had her walls thrown up when it came to answering it.

“No, everything is fine,” she said stiffly. “It’s just—it’s just personal stuff.”

The implication that *personal* things did not include Malfoy was unpleasant to say the least. Hermione had once worn a collar with his initials on it. He knew the sound she made when he laid soft kisses on the line of her throat. They had been as *personal* with each other as it was humanly possible to be.

Just then, the Portkey station’s crackling magical speakerphone announced that the next Acropolis connecting Portkey was ready, and would all Translators and security witches and wizards visiting the Ruins please line up at the orange line?

Hermione fumbled with her bags.

“That’s us, we better go,” she said. “Sorry, again for being late. Thank you for not being upset...”

The sight of her struggling with the bags was too much to bear. Malfoy took them from her, working the strap free of her fingers. He placed them atop his own bags.

“I’ll take these,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

From the surprised relief in her face, Malfoy surmised Hermione wasn’t used to people helping carry her bags—a fact that did not endear Weasley any further to him.

“Thanks,” Hermione said, a hitch in her voice. “Thank you. They were getting heavy.”

“I know. I’ve got you.”

The second Portkey took them to a much smaller connecting station that bordered the Acropolis ruins specifically. There was some paperwork there that Hermione and Malfoy needed to fill out, being as they were from the British Ministry and there for research purposes. All in all, by the time they were checked into the site and given the keys to two of the ten cabins bordering the Sunken Temple’s ravine, it was nearly five.

The day had hit its hottest point an hour or so prior, and even now as the sun glowed orange, preparing to begin its descent below the horizon, the air was thick with heat. A thin sheen of sweat shone on Hermione’s face.

He was looking at her out of the corner of his eye—her eyes bright, face glowing in the dimming sun—when she cast a surreptitious glance his way as well.

“What?” he asked, amused.

"Sorry—it's just, I've never seen you in sunglasses before," she said. She laughed, embarrassed. "I really like them. You look like a guy out of Top Gun or something."

"I'm glad," Malfoy said, smiling. "What's Top Gun?"

"Oh—it's a muggle thing," she giggled. "Doesn't matter. They look great."

Malfoy decided he ought to wear these around her more often.

"I guess it's probably too late to go down the ravine tonight," she said, coming to a stop in front of the cabins. "Sorry again that you had to wait so long. I hope you're not too upset with me."

It was not the first time Malfoy had noticed that Hermione seemed averse to disappointing him. He liked it.

"I'm not upset," he said. "And—I know you were looking forward to checking out the Temple. I can still accompany you, if you want to go down."

Her face lit up with disbelieving excitement.

"Really? Oh—that would be amazing! I was so disappointed that I might have to delay my research a day."

"I'm supposed to do a security sweep before we head down together. But it's getting late. If you promise to stick closely to me, I can do it in tandem with you doing research."

"I promise," she said at once. "Whatever helps you do the job."

"Let's just go over the rules then. I heard it's not always safe around here, so I need you to do as I say."

Hermione turned instantly pink at his words, a reaction Malfoy had not expected. Her eyes darted to his.

"Um—what?" she asked, in a high-pitched voice.

"You'll need to do as I say."

"Right," she licked her lips, visibly flustered. "Okay, yes. Of course."

The silence between them grew very slightly charged. Was Malfoy imagining it? He assessed her expression, her body language. They were standing just outside his cabin, near a bench.

"Sit down, Hermione."

She did so immediately.

"Good."

Hermione actually shivered.

Malfoy's pulse started kicking an unsteady, excited rhythm in his ears. She was still the same. She was still the same—

"What, um," she cleared her throat. "What are the security rules?"

"You're not allowed to go down without me. If I tell you we need to stop for whatever reason, you listen to me. If I tell you to put down what you're doing, I mean immediately. Can you do that for me?"

Hermione squirmed.

"Yes," she said hoarsely.

"*Very* good."

Hermione looked humiliated by the force of her reaction to these words.

"Nervous?" he asked. "Poor thing."

Hermione turned, if possible, redder. She nodded quickly and looked down at her hands, fiddling with her purse zipper.

Malfoy wasn't sure whether to press his advantage now or to give her a break.

Hermione fidgeted uneasily in her seat, and he realized he was staring at her.

"Should we go down?" she asked nervously.

"Right," Malfoy said. "Let's."

~

The fading glow of evening was entirely lost deeper down in the ravine. The cliffs cast everything in shadow, and Malfoy and Hermione had to tread carefully as they descended the aluminum staircase that led from the site down to the temple.

Malfoy went ahead of Hermione, holding his wand high in a *Lumos* to light their way.

They were both silent on the way down. On Malfoy's end, this was mostly because he was debating rapidly whether it would help or hurt his cause if he managed to coax Hermione into cheating on Weasley.

He knew Hermione of old wouldn't have considered infidelity to be part of romantic courtship. It was why he'd avoided chasing her too aggressively thus far.

But, seeing the way she'd reacted to him just now... Maybe he ought to close the final distance. Maybe she would forget all about her boyfriend, with Malfoy's hand on her throat and his words hissed with loving darkness into her ear.

The only thing stopping Malfoy was the inexplicably crystal clear image of what might happen after.

She would reciprocate in the heat of the moment, he was almost sure. But no version of Hermione would be without guilt after infidelity. She would confess to Weasley, maybe—and then Malfoy would become off-limits. Just an ill-advised liaison she'd made once on a work trip. And he would no longer be able to indulge in even the barely concealed flirtation he had steadily been laying down with her.

"The steps are slippery," Hermione said behind him, clearly attempting to pierce the tense silence.

"You can hold onto me," Malfoy said, slowing down. "Don't fall."

After a moment, he felt the faint sensation of her fingers grasping his robes. Careful not to touch his body.

Once they were on solid ground, Malfoy increased the intensity of his *Lumos*, the better to see all around.

The ravine was too big to be illuminated by the light of just one wand. But the narrow, beaten path that led from the aluminum stairs to the yawning mouth of a towering, ruined temple was clearly visible. So was the entrance to the temple, though its craggy, caved-in surface was thrown into sharp contrasting relief, all shadows and planes of light.

On the walls to the right and left of the temple door were rows and rows of script, carved into the damp stone.

"Oh my god, it's amazing," Hermione whispered. "Can I—can we go take a look at the Runes?"

*So polite, darling.*

"Go on," he said aloud. "I'm right behind you."

She stepped forward eagerly. Malfoy followed, his wand still lighting their path. There were no dangerous curses or hexes lying in wait for them, though the entire area was steeped in ancient magic. His *Lumos* flickered and dimmed.

"The area around the temple tends to stifle ordinary magic," Hermione said, digging in her purse for a muggle lighting device. "Here."

Malfoy examined his flickering wand with interest, then stowed it and followed Hermione's instructions to click on the electric torch.

Hermione pulled a battered notebook from her shoulder bag and began comparing the script on the wall to the written records she had carefully affixed to her notebook.

Malfoy held the electric torch steady, lowered so it was just by her shoulder, the better to let her see her writing.

The tense, taut silence between them faded comfortably into focused quiet as Hermione studiously went about her research. Malfoy watched her with plain hunger as she worked. The glowing curls of her hair, bright and bronze in the light of his wand. The delicate slope of her shoulder. Her hands, which were steady and did not shake at all, undamaged as they were in this version of things.

It felt silly to be this physically close to her and yet not have her for himself. And Malfoy remembered then that he'd had the exact same thought when he was a prisoner of the Order.

Hermione finished up taking notes, unaware of Malfoy's intense gaze on her back. She moved to the next stretch of Runes, and Malfoy followed close as a shadow.

"You can tell by the different types of roughness on the stone surface that the erosion has come from multiple causes," Hermione chirped, scribbling in her notebook. "Some from water damage—there must have been floods, though unclear from what water source—and some from combat."

Malfoy's soldier's curiosity was piqued.

"What kind of combat?" he asked.

"A schism in the church, it's theorized," she said, looking pleased by his interest. "Rival priests with military support."

She smiled up at him. The sight of her crouched at his feet elicited a flood of unhelpful memories. Hermione in her blue nightgown, a glint of silver at her neck. Reading on the rug while Malfoy worked.

"I see," he said, trying to focus.

"Are you interested in history?"

"Oh, very much so," he said, thinking of theirs.

Hermione looked happy about this, and returned to examining the wall with a lingering smile on her face.

"I could use some book recommendations on the history of this temple," Malfoy said. "If you have any."

"Oh! I'd love to share a list with you. Are you a big reader?"

"I am. I've actually read a few of the books I've seen on your desk. Just out of—curiosity."

"What!" she laughed. "That's great—how come you never told me?"

"Maybe I like surprising you."

She shot him a pleased look.

“Like with the cake?” she said.

Malfoy smiled.

“Like with the cake.”

Her expression faltered then. It seemed like the mention of the cake had made her think of something else. Malfoy’s intuition told him it had to do with Weasley. Had Hermione and Ron fought over the appropriateness of Malfoy’s gift? Was that why she’d been crying last night?

“Look at me,” Malfoy said. She did. “What are you thinking about? You can tell me.”

Her eyes were slightly glassy under his stern gaze.

“Um,” she breathed. “Just—Ron said something last night that upset me. That he thought you’d always...”

But her sentence was interrupted by a sudden whooshing and chattering—a small crowd of bats had awoken, and were swooping out of unseen crevices to fly out and up into the dark sky.

“What were you saying?” Malfoy asked, tight with curiosity.

But Hermione blinked quickly and looked away, seemingly regaining her composure. Their moment of soft intimacy was over.

“Nothing,” she said, clearing her throat. “Actually—I think I have enough here for tonight. Let’s head back up.”

Malfoy indicated she should go up the stairs first, then followed closely at her back. She smelled faintly of sweat, and of vanilla shampoo. She was close enough for him to hear her little breaths, for him to feel the radiant heat of her body.

He let his fingers reach forward to catch a stray curl of her hair. He let go before she could notice.

“Thanks again for coming down with me,” she said, once they were at the top. “I really appreciate it.”

“Anytime. You did a very good job following instructions.”

Hermione fumbled and dropped her pen. She crouched quickly to pick it up again, her cheeks pink.

“Well, I better go to bed,” she said in a high voice. “Goodnight, Malfoy. See you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, Hermione.”

Hermione walked quickly to her cabin and disappeared behind the door. A moment later, the lamp inside the window flicked on, and Malfoy was left only with a frustrating sense of distance from her.

He cast some security spells at her front door and windows, then went to his own cabin for the night.

He fucked his hand in the shower, with hot water streaming down his neck and back, beading at his lips as they parted to let heavy breaths out.

Malfoy thought of the same thing over and over—the pink flush on her cheeks, the way she shivered at every hint of a command from him.

She was the same.

She was the same.

She was the same.

~

As though Malfoy's suffering wasn't prolonged enough, he woke the next morning to find that his hopes of another long day spent with Hermione (ending, in his optimistic but no less persistent fantasy, with her shuddering at his commands in bed) were dashed. The rest of the Runes Department, it appeared, had decided to come early to surprise Hermione.

The formerly empty site was bustling with Translators by late morning, all ten of the tents occupied now. Berkon and Hermione were in animated conversation on the porch of his cabin. The multitude of other Runes Department workers that Malfoy didn't know seemed to him no less than the enemy—encroaching on his rare and increasingly heating interactions with Hermione.

To make matters worse, Hermione seemed to be avoiding him after the tension of the night before. Malfoy got the impression she was embarrassed.

It probably would have been too much to hope that she hadn't noticed what he was doing. Did she know now for certain that he was in pursuit of her? Malfoy tried to imagine Hermione giving Weasley a Floo call the night before (*I think Auror Malfoy might be making a pass at me*) , and his jaw set unhappily.

Auror Longbottom had arrived with the new group, which Malfoy actually didn't mind. Ever since his long-gone conversation with Pansy on the dusty floor of his destroyed home, Malfoy had a soft spot for Longbottom.

"Morning," he said curtly to Neville, a greeting he hadn't bothered bestowing on any of the other newcomers.

"Hey, Malfoy," Neville said brightly. "How's it going?"

“Not bad. Yourself?”

“Good, good. You here for the full two weeks?”

“I am.”

“Me as well!”

“I’m surprised Pansy’s not anxious with you being on assignment for so long,” Malfoy said, amused.

Neville did his best to look offended.

“I am allowed to go places, you know,” he said. “Just because the wedding is coming up doesn’t mean she wants me on a leash or anything.”

Malfoy just looked at him.

Neville’s shoulders slumped.

“Alright, she’s worried sick,” he admitted. “I keep telling her, ‘I don’t know what you’re so anxious about. You’d think I up and die every time we’re not together’ ...”

“She cares about you,” Malfoy said, unsmiling.

Having seen a world in which neither Neville nor Pansy survived, Malfoy wasn’t quite able to talk about it with the same levity as Longbottom.

“She does,” Neville said, smiling a little. He rubbed his neck, his eyes softening. “Yeah, I know. I’m crazy about her too. I promised to Floo her every night, and—I guess now’s a good time to tell you she asked me to inform you that if I get hurt it’s on your head.”

“I figured as much,” Malfoy said, who was distracted just then by the sight of Hermione crouching down to tie a pink shoelace on her white canvas boot.

She was looking much more chipper today, after a night of rest and a morning of socializing.

Unfortunately, he didn’t get to see her any closer. She descended the metal staircase with Berkon and the rest, and Auror Longbottom followed. It was Malfoy’s shift today of pacing the cabins and reinforcing the security charms, rather than going down into the ravine.

The rest of the first week passed in a similarly disappointing fashion. Even every other day when Malfoy went down with the group, Hermione seemed to want to avoid being in a one-on-one interaction with him, especially with everyone else there.

It was enough to drive a man to madness.

On Friday, Malfoy decided he needed to do something to move things forward again. Having caught her on her own, examining a series of clay pots the team had unearthed, Malfoy

walked over to watch her work. To give some sort of excuse for this detour in his usual pacing around the entire group, Malfoy asked to check the pots for magical signatures.

“Anything unusual about them?” Hermione asked.

“No,” he said, stepping back. “They’re fine. Just being careful.”

“We’ve been, um—searching for some sort of magically significant artifact,” Hermione said without looking at Malfoy. “The text on the walls indicate multiple religious items with great power. We haven’t found any yet.”

“Let me know if I can help.”

“I will, thank you...”

They were silent a moment. The back of Hermione’s neck turned steadily pinker, as Malfoy lingered longer.

“You’ve been skittish,” Malfoy said quietly. “Do I make you nervous?”

She nearly dropped the pot she was holding.

“No,” she said.

“You can tell me the truth.”

Hermione was silent for a few seconds.

“Yes,” she said softly. “Sometimes.”

“In a bad way?”

A beat. Her face was pink.

“Not—not exactly...”

He had no opportunity to ask her to elaborate, because at that moment one of the Translators by the Water Temple’s fountain shouted out in excitement.

Both Malfoy and Hermione looked up to follow the sound.

They’d triggered something at the base of the temple. It was rising up—some sort of plinth? On it was an urn.

“Don’t touch that,” Malfoy yelled, striding forward—but too late. The Translator had already eagerly rushed forward to examine the artifact.

A blinding light immediately flooded the temple. Malfoy turned from it, seeking Hermione.

There was a loud, ear-grating sound of stone rubbing on stone—then the deafening roar of water falling. It poured down from above, from seemingly every available surface: cascading

down the jagged sides of the ravine, pouring in heavy falls from the walls of the temple itself. The air became thick with frothy mist.

Hermione, standing right by the mosaic-covered back wall of the temple, was knocked immediately to the ground.

Ignoring the panicked cries of everyone else, Malfoy dove after her.

The water was so heavy and fast that it was more solid than liquid. Falling from above—a vertical riptide, enough to knock someone down and hold them there.

Malfoy reached through the pummeling fall, breath held and teeth clenched, constantly fighting the downward force. The water slammed his chest against the stone floor, knocking the breath out of him.

There was nothing here—where was Hermione? He couldn't feel anyone—was she already swept away—

And then his fingers closed on fabric. He surged forward, and gripped her arm.

He dragged her up and back, kicking off the floor to counter the crushing force of the water now surrounding them. He was relieved that she was clearly an adept swimmer, and had been making progress against the water even without his help.

“Get—the others!” Hermione choked out.

He almost laughed at how little she understood his motivations.

“Hold onto me,” he said. “We’ve got to get to the stairs.”

“Malfoy, *I can swim!* Please, help the others—“

“They’re fine! I can see them.”

This was a patent lie, but luckily it turned out to be true. Malfoy clutched her arm and looped it over his shoulder, swimming as fast as he could through the rising black water while avoiding the dozens of thundering falls still pouring from above. As he neared the metal stairs, he saw that most of the group was already there. Choking up water, staggering under the weight of drenched clothes.

Auror Longbottom wasn’t there. Malfoy swung around to search the water with panicked eyes—he had taken it for granted that the only other Auror would be able to fend for himself. A tide of relief came over him when he saw splashing, and found that Neville was swimming ably towards the stairs, Berkon safely in tow.

Hermione was trying to climb off him.

“Malfoy, listen—“ she said, starting to swim back towards where they came from. “You go up first, I’m going to go get the urn.”

“No you’re not.” Malfoy took hold of her arm. “This place is going to be underwater in five minutes. Hold still or I’ll knock you out and bring you up unconscious.”

“Malfoy, *please!* The temple is going to be destroyed. We need to at least get the last artifact—“

“She’s right,” Berkon shouted breathlessly. “Perhaps if we pool our magic, we can conjure a rope—“

“*Accio,*” Malfoy snapped in the direction of the urn, dragging Hermione up the steps.

“That won’t work down here! The temple—“

But everyone watched, astounded, as a whip-like strand of Malfoy’s golden ward spells shot forward and seized the urn. The artifact flew back towards the group, and Berkon caught it with a muffled *oof*.

“How did you do that?” Hermione sputtered, shocked.

“Auror training,” Malfoy lied.

The truth was, he was as surprised it had worked as everyone else. He remembered the failed *Lumos* from the day before and had not expected a summoning spell to fare better. He’d mostly cast it so Hermione would relax long enough for him to drag her further up to the surface.

It was the first time his security wards had appeared outside of his home. They were usually fixed to things like the walls of his house, or the possessions Malfoy guarded.

Preoccupied as everyone else was by the rising water, no one paid attention to the golden thread returning silently back to where it had emerged from. Malfoy watched as the magic sank back into Hermione’s skin.

He had never really let her go, it seemed. Not even when time had dragged them apart.

~

Malfoy tried not to be too visibly surly about the fact that the Runes Department was far more interested in the urn’s retrieval than about the fact that Hermione had nearly been killed.

It brought to mind unfavorable comparisons to the Order, and the way in which Hermione had been callously used up in the last version of the world.

She was, at least, more ecstatic than anyone else about the urn. And the whole crisis had broken down something between them: she let him hold her hand—ostensibly to help her up—as they staggered out of the ravine. He squeezed her fingers and wondered if he imagined, after a pause, the faint answering pressure.

She let go of his hand at the top of the ravine to look back, down the stairs. A deceptively placid black lake now covered the temple.

Malfoy tugged her away from the edge and she stumbled after him.

Berkon and the rest were beside themselves with fascination at the urn. Hermione rushed to the Translators circling the artifact, immediately jumping into the conversation that speculated on what the urn was for and why it had triggered the drowning of the temple.

Malfoy watched her so intently that he didn't notice Neville coming to stand right next to him until the man shook his wet hair, scattering drops on Malfoy.

"That was mental! Who'd have thought an archaeological assignment might have this kind of danger. Jesus."

"Mm," Malfoy said, staring at Hermione.

Neville, still catching his breath, followed Malfoy's gaze.

"She seems to be handling everything better than I expected," he said, casting drying spells at random on his shirt. "I was kind of worried about her."

Malfoy turned his attention sharply to Neville.

"What do you mean?"

"Aurors!" came Berkon's cheery voice. "We're all heading into town for celebratory drinks! Please join, I insist!"

Malfoy ignored him.

"Didn't she say anything?" Neville asked. "Shit—don't tell her I told you. I only know because Pansy heard..."

"Longbottom. What are you talking about?"

"Well, I mean—she and Ron had a huge row," Neville said, lowering his voice. "She *moved out*. They've broken up."

The ground under Malfoy's feet seemed to shift. He reeled.

"Let's go, lads!" Berkon called again.

Malfoy looked up at once, his eyes focusing with shaken intensity on Hermione's retreating back. Her hair was damp and curling in the heat, her shirt still a little sodden. Soft-looking, like a shell he could pierce through with a press of his teeth.

"Shall we go with them?" Neville asked.

Malfoy didn't speak. He was already walking after her.

## Chapter End Notes

(btw, thank you so much for your comments!! I haven't been responding to as many lately, but please know that I read every single one. they always make my day. love u <3 next chapter coming soon!)

# Chapter 32

## Chapter Notes



chapter count wobblin but we're nearly there

Hermione felt high on the excitement of the evening. Adrenaline from their narrow escape—from the attainment of what might well be the most significant artifact find of the year—rendered her light-headed. It was a welcome opportunity to forget about everything with Ron, to forget about everything except for the pure triumph that was this trip.

“First round’s on me!” Berkon said to the group as they trudged away from the camp site. “Pints? Or shall we hunt for some sort of Greek specialty cocktail?”

“Oh!” Hermione said. “I looked this up before we came! Ouzo lemonade—let’s try to find some.”

The city wasn’t far—Hermione could already see where sunbaked ruins gave way to crowded, heat-hazed streets lined with shops and pubs. Just as they started trudging their way over, the Aurors caught up.

Neville started talking to Berkon, but Malfoy fell into step at Hermione’s side.

He looked breathless and slightly dazed.

“I’d like to buy you a drink,” he said. “If that’s fine.”

Hermione fought the self-conscious urge to avert her gaze from him. She had developed the muscle memory over the last few days that she ought to avoid extended eye contact—especially if Malfoy was being his clipped Auror self—lest she fall into more embarrassing incidents in which she was unable to hide how flustered he made her.

But the Hermione of tonight was bolder and less nervous than all that. They had just survived a magical flood, after all. A little familiarity was fine.

“That sounds great! Um—I want to try ouzo lemonade. You can get me one of those?”

“I’ll get you whatever you want.”

Hermione bit back a wide smile.

The first few pubs they went to didn’t have ouzo lemonade—though Berkon insisted on getting pints for everyone at each stop. As a result, they were all tipsy and laughing by the

time they finally stumbled on a place that did. It was a little bar tucked behind a row of souvenir shops, the windows glowing yellow in the darkening purple-hued evening.

Inside, the walls were tiled with white and frothy blue. Through the alcohol-fuzzed rosiness of Hermione's vision, it gave the room a feeling of fantastical openness. Like she was a bird over the Aegean Sea.

Malfoy stayed close, resting a hand on the counter beside hers as she pointed to order the lemon cocktail.

"Do you want one too?" Hermione asked Malfoy.

"Might be a bit sweet for me."

"Oh, right," she laughed, sipping through the straw. "I forgot you dislike sweet things."

"Well," he said, looking at her out of the corner of his eye. He smiled. "Maybe not *all* sweet things."

Hermione's stomach twisted with butterflies and she bit down on the straw.

Malfoy was flirting with her, right? Or was this just the rosy sheen of tipsy confidence?

Hermione had never had a chance to be single *for real*, and she found herself giddily excited about the prospect. She'd gone from a mostly-innocent student (albeit with a few kisses from Viktor Krum and Cormac McLaggen on the way) to Ron's serious girlfriend. There hadn't been much time for anything in between.

But now, under Malfoy's indulgent attention, Hermione felt drunk, desirable, and extremely aware of how very handsome her favorite Auror looked tonight.

He made no move to order anything for himself, and Hermione realized she wasn't sure he'd had any beer at the previous spots either.

"Do you not drink?" she asked curiously.

"I do."

"I don't want to drink alone," she wheedled. "Have something with me."

Malfoy laughed.

"Mm. I'm not sure I'm supposed to drink on the job."

"But the job's over, isn't it? Look! Neville has a pint. So you can loosen up too, if you like."

"You might not like me when I'm loosened up."

Their hands were closer now, somehow. Had he moved? Nearly touching.

Alcohol swam encouragingly through her. She took a fortifying sip of lemonade, and her straw buzzed against the empty bottom of the glass.

“If you have a lemonade with me,” she said. “I’ll give you a kiss on the cheek.”

Malfoy’s eyes widened.

He didn’t respond immediately—just enough time for Hermione’s drink-fueled boldness to wither. But then he knocked on the counter to get the bartender’s attention. He pointed at Hermione’s glass and said something in Greek.

Relief and excitement swooped in her stomach.

“I never knew you spoke Greek,” she said eagerly. “Teach me something. A word.”

“What word, darling?”

Another swoop.

“Um—“ she fiddled with her empty glass. “What you said to the bartender.”

Malfoy smiled.

“I said *more of these*. Here, I’ll teach you one of the words. *Peri...*”

Hermione realized he was waiting for her to repeat after him.

“*Peri*,” she said gamely.

“*So*—“

He leaned in closer, lazily lowering his head into her space. His lips by her ear, using the noise of the crowded room as an excuse to get close to her.

“*S-so*.<sup>”</sup>

“*Terro*.<sup>”</sup>

“*Terro*.<sup>”</sup>

“*Perissótero*,” Malfoy said.

“*Perissótero*.<sup>”</sup>

He smiled.

“Very good, sweetheart.”

Hermione blushed.

“Thanks. What does it mean?”

“More.”

Malfoy received the ouzo lemonade from the bartender then. He lifted it to his lips and took a long draw, pausing to make a face at—presumably—the cloying sugar. Hermione giggled. Malfoy met her eyes and finished the rest of his drink in one go.

“You owe me a kiss,” he said, setting the glass down.

Malfoy’s grey eyes were soft but focused, watching her. He looked so good. The way his blond hair fell slightly forward when he tipped his head down to look at her. The straight line of his jaw... his serious mouth.

A mouth that curled up in amusement now, under her glassy gaze.

Hermione stood on her toes to give him a quick, close-lipped kiss to the cheek.

She tried to pull away after, but Malfoy didn’t let her. His hand moved—almost spasmodically—to her lower back. A firm press; keeping her close, sending her leaning into him.

He took an unsteady breath; she felt it in the way his chest constricted against her palm.

“Can I have another?” he asked softly.

“Only if you have another drink,” she giggled, trying to peel away.

Malfoy made a noise of amused frustration. Hermione laughed and squirmed against him, and Malfoy—his hand sliding comfortably around her to press intimately against her stomach—asked the bartender for more drinks.

“One for me too!” Hermione chirped in his ear.

The bartender returned with a glass of lemonade for Hermione and two tall shots of vodka for Malfoy.

Hermione wrinkled her nose at the strong smell of the liquor, but Malfoy took both shots without fuss.

“That was two doubles,” he said. “*Four* shots total.”

She gave him four quick pecks, all on the same cheek. She seemed to detect Malfoy falling apart a little more with each one, and it sent a thrill through her.

They were so close together. Where had the rest of the group gone? Hermione was relieved it was just her and Malfoy, with no one here to witness this rapidly escalating sloppy flirtation.

“And what if I want a real kiss?” he asked softly. A group of people edged in behind them and Malfoy slid a protective arm behind Hermione. “How many drinks will that cost me?”

“On the mouth?”

Malfoy ducked his head low. Hermione obligingly tipped her head to the side, thinking he wanted to whisper something in her ear, but instead he pressed his nose and lips flush her neck. Breathing her in.

The feeling of him inhaling against her made her shiver.

“Perissótero,” he whispered into her skin. He bit down lightly.

Hermione accidentally knocked over her glass. But Malfoy stretched out a hand to catch it before it hit the ground. Auror reflexes—he didn’t even need to look.

“Two drinks,” she breathed, as Malfoy bit down softly on her earlobe.

“For a kiss on the mouth? What a bargain.”

Her head tipped back as he licked her pulse point.

“Or—or you can have three,” she managed to say. “And I’ll go back to your cabin with you.”

His hand, already clutching her waist, tightened at once.

~

Ten minutes later and Hermione was fumbling with the doorknob of Malfoy’s cabin, shushing him through giggles as he continued trying to drag her close, pressing kisses to her mouth and jaw.

Giggling, warm and fuzzy from a long night of increasingly drunk flirtation, it took her an inordinate amount of time to open the door.

“Finally,” she laughed, as the keys twisted all the way. “Ooh, your place is so *neat*. Such a disciplined Auror...”

But there was nothing disciplined about him now. Malfoy followed her into the cabin with urgency, kissing her like the only air in the world was between her lips.

“*Malfoy*,” Hermione laughed. “Look how *clingy* you are—”

He picked her up abruptly, kicking the door shut with his boot and then pinning her against it. Hermione wrapped her legs around his waist, giggling uncontrollably.

This was, without a doubt, what people meant when they talked about a *sloppy hookup*. Hermione could still taste the ouzo lemonade on her own lips. Malfoy’s mouth smelled of the vodka she’d bartered him for.

He took her jaw in his hand, holding her still. So their eyes were level, his forehead touching hers.

"So good," he whispered, a slight softening to his consonants the only indication of how drunk he was. "My good girl, coming home with me."

Malfoy kissed her, again and again. He bit down on her lower lip. Hermione, pinned against the wall, could do nothing but shudder under his mouth.

"I missed you," he whispered.

There was an unexpected note of pain in the words.

Hermione touched his cheek. She smoothed the hair out of his eyes.

"What do you mean?" she asked softly. He looked so serious. "We were together all day..."

A pause.

"Still," he said.

"Okay," she said, kissing his nose. "Show me how much you missed me then."

Malfoy shoved her a little more firmly against the wall. Hermione's head jostled forward slightly and she gasped in delight.

He pushed his hips forward, so the hard muscles of his stomach ground between her legs.

When she squirmed and arched, he pressed harder, shifting slightly side to side to give her more friction.

"Feels good, sweetheart?"

"Yes—yes. Please—" she grappled for his fingers, trying to slide his hand between them.  
"Please, more."

"You've got to be patient. Can you do that? Can you do as you're told?"

Hermione moaned. Malfoy slowly ground against her, leaning all the way in, their bodies flush against each other, the wall hard and unyielding at her back.

"I know you like the way I talk to you," he said in her ear. "My girl needs a firm hand, I know that..."

"Please," she whispered piteously. "I'm too drunk to wait."

A beat of silence in response to this. Malfoy leaned back a little, still breathing hard, his white blond hair mussed from her fingers, assessing her. A flicker of uncertainty appeared in his eyes.

"How drunk are you?" he asked.

"Very drunk." Malfoy took a half step back and Hermione quickly went on: "Are you worried I'm not consenting? Because I'm *enthusiastically* consenting..."

“I don’t want you to regret this tomorrow.”

“I won’t. *Please.* I need you.”

That was all she needed to say, evidently. Malfoy threw her more securely against him with one arm and carried her to the bed.

“Such a spoiled girl. How am I supposed to say no to you?”

Malfoy crawled on top of her and kissed her neck, his fingers undoing the buttons of her shirt. When it was off, he dropped his mouth hungrily to the exposed skin. Her clavicle, her breasts—a dozen starving kisses to her stomach and hips and then he was tugging her trousers down too.

He let his hands skim down her sides, then grazed his fingertips over the line of her underwear.

“*Draco...*”

“Oh that’s good, darling. Say my name again.”

She did. He cooed breathlessly at her, pulled her legs apart and dragged the wet center of her underwear to the side.

“Can I kiss you here, my love?”

“Yes.”

Malfoy pressed his face down against her immediately. His mouth worked, firm and fast, his tongue curling over her clit until Hermione saw stars.

She came far too quickly. She wished it had lasted longer, it was just all too much. Hermione orgasmed with a hiccoughing wail—drunk and heady and oversensitive, riding the high of hearing Malfoy call her *my love*—before she had any time to prepare herself.

“So good,” he whispered, kissing her clit as she shuddered. “Listen to those pretty noises. I bet that feels better now, doesn’t it?”

Hermione nodded deliriously, shivering and trying to close her legs. Malfoy dropped a final kiss to her cunt, then released her.

He kneeled over her, staring at her body. His mouth was wet from eating at her.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered, wiping his lips with the back of one hand.

His trousers were tented. He was obviously fully hard.

“Can I see you?” she whispered.

“Come here, then.”

Hermione crawled forward and laid her fingers against him. She felt through the fabric to find the hard, long shape of him.

An unexpected little flare of nervousness fluttered through her.

*So big.*

She looked up at him, wanting to see his expression. And when their eyes met, his cock twitched under her fingers.

Malfoy was tall and in shadow, kneeling over her. Like a warden. She wanted him to do with her as he wished.

“You look so nervous,” came his low voice. He palmed her cheek and she leaned into his touch. “What’s the matter, pet?”

“I’ve never had casual sex before,” she said.

Malfoy smiled with fond amusement at this, like he found it adorable.

“What?” she demanded, laughing. “Why is that funny?”

“You’re sweet. That’s all. You—*ah...*”

Hermione had leaned forward to kiss his stomach, just over the line of his trousers.

Malfoy gathered her hair in his hands, stroking the curls with reverent tenderness.

“Do you want me to suck you?” Hermione asked.

The shiver that went through him at these words was like a tide. Starting at his hips and rolling upwards, his breath catching at its peak.

“You want to?” he asked quietly. He sounded—under the thrum of obvious arousal—curious. Almost surprised.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Can I?”

She heard him hum quietly. He was thinking.

“Not this time,” he finally said.

Hermione was floored by this response.

A man, *rejecting a blowjob?*

Malfoy laughed quietly at her obvious shock.

“Don’t think I’m some saint,” he whispered. “Turn around. Get on your hands and knees.”

Hermione did so at once.

Through the buzz of inebriation, complicated questions were sliding their way into her brain. Sluggishly, she registered what he'd said: *not this time*.

Did this mean he wanted there to be a *next* time?

Or had that been Malfoy's polite way of expressing a much less kind male response—namely: *no, because I want to come in your cunt and not your mouth.*

But the concerns withered in the face of mindless pleasure. Malfoy ran his large palms over her arse, and the feeling of him touching her sent wave after wave of dopamine and oxytocin through her. She wanted him always to be touching her.

He dragged his thumb lower, between her legs, to press over her swollen clit.

She bucked.

"My pretty girl," he breathed. "I love touching you here. So sensitive."

Hermione whimpered. The way he talked to her—it was sublime.

"That's it," he said. "Just relax. Will you be good?"

"Yes, yes—I promise..."

"Good girls deserve to feel good."

Malfoy stroked her clit harder. He switched out his thumb for two fingers and dragged a firm circle around the sensitive nub. Hermione's hips thrust back involuntarily, her eyes squeezed shut.

She felt his other hand let go of her hip, and a moment later came the sound of a leather belt clinking. Then a zipper being pulled down.

Ecstasy was like a fog in her head. She felt soft and undone. Like Malfoy's plaything.

"Do you want me to use a condom?" he asked softly.

"No—it's ok—I'm on protection—"

This elicited a little groan from him, and a kiss on her hip.

A moment later, Hermione felt him drag the tip of his cock against her sodden entrance. Skin on skin—warm and as intimate was physically possible.

Malfoy dragged himself up and down over her, very slowly. And all the while Hermione heard his breath come harder and faster.

He was shaking. Or maybe that was her.

On the fifth or sixth drag, Hermione tried to push against him, tried to get him to go *in*.

“Please,” she whispered.

Malfoy leaned low to kiss her back. Then he shoved in.

Hermione nearly collapsed. He was thick, and hard, and the stretch came inch by inch. Forcing into her. But he rocked softly against her, and the pleasure overrode pain.

And he was saying such wonderful things to her.

“Good girl, that’s alright.” A ragged breath, a mindless shiver of his hips. “Just like that, darling. You can take it, can’t you? My beautiful girl, my perfect *fucking girl* —I never want to be apart from you again.”

The pleasure chemicals were like a drug. She moaned softly, clenching, and Malfoy grunted at the tightening.

He pushed in until his hips were pressed against her arse. Then he shuddered and pulled back.

Hermione arched up against him, clenching convulsively around the pleasurable intrusion.

“If you push a little higher,” she gasped. “Please—if you—“

Malfoy laughed softly—he snapped his hips twice against her, driving his cock into exactly the right spot. As though just to say: *as if I don’t know exactly where you’re talking about*.

Hermione screamed. She pushed her hands harder into the bed, trying to get more leverage to push up against him. Needing him to hit that spot again and again and again. She had never been able to reach it before, her fingers not long enough.

“Malfoy, please—keep going, you’re going to make me—“

“What’s my name?” he hissed.

“Malfoy—no, please don’t stop. No, no, no—“

“What’s my name, darling?”

“Draco!”

The right answer.

He adjusted his long fingers around his hips and resumed fucking into her, firm and precise and thick.

It was perfect. Right *there*, every time, so hard and possessive and he knew exactly how to make the pressure climb and climb—

“Draco,” she said, the words muffled against the blanket. She just wanted to keep saying it. Every time she did he drilled into her a little faster, a little less steady.

“Yes, princess.”

“Draco.”

“That pretty fucking mouth. My name sounds *so good in it*—”

Malfoy leaned low, his hips not stopping, his hand at her clit, and pressed his mouth to her ear.

“I’m never going without you again,” he panted. “You understand me? Never again.”

Hermione nodded, loose and fast, agreeing with anything he said. She was so close already.

“Please—just like that—I’m *gonna*—”

“Not yet, darling. You come when I do.”

But it was too much. Hermione shattered.

She didn’t want to be a bad girl. She’d promised she’d be patient. She squeezed her eyes shut in shame, tears beading at the lashes from her frantic attempt at holding it back. But it was just all too much.

She screamed—her body shook so violently that her knees gave out. The dread at having disobeyed him ran like an electric wire through her pleasure, giving the orgasm an unfamiliar edge of danger.

Malfoy had seemed in control of the pace of his own pleasure until then. But at the sight and sound of her coming, he groaned and swayed forward, and then she felt him pulsing out inside her.

He finished in her, his entire body shuddering, his hand braced loving up against her stomach, holding her in the right position for him.

And Hermione felt full of bliss.

---

The last thing she remembered before falling asleep was slumping forward, exhausted and trembling, aftershocks of pleasure still humming like dancing static electricity through her.

Malfoy crawled next to her to bring her close to him. He was breathing hard, his chest rising and falling rapidly against Hermione’s cheek. He kissed the top of her head, her temple, her nose—he wound their fingers together and dragged her legs between his. As close as possible.

Unexpectedly romantic for a drunken fling.

“Draco,” Hermione mumbled, tucking her nose against his chest. “I’m tired.”

“I know, darling,” he whispered. “I’m here now.”

The comforting vibration of his words. The warm tenderness in his voice, the way he held her like something precious.

Hermione drifted off before he even finished the sentence.

~

The next morning started with the fragments of an exultant dream, lingering at her consciousness as Hermione woke. There were dragons in it, and cherries, and the scent of oranges and spice and burning wicks.

And then the searing throb of a hangover headache.

Hermione coughed and sat up, squinting against the unwelcome morning light.

*God.* How much had she had to drink? She could hardly remember...

Hermione, in the middle of rubbing her eyes, froze.

There was something warm next to her.

Someone.

Malfoy’s heavy arm was draped possessively over her stomach—his muscled forearm, the faint outline of his removed Dark Mark. She followed the line of it, her eyes growing wider and wider as she did.

He was naked. They were *both* naked. And that was because—

All at once, memories of the previous night reassembled themselves.

“Oh my god,” Hermione whispered.

His face, close to hers while they drank at the pub. His lips grazing her ear as he whispered Greek to her. Stumbling into his cabin.

Orgasms.

She now knew what his cock looked like. What he sounded like when he came—his delicious, agonized groan.

“Oh my god.”

She eased his arm off her, then untangled herself from the bedsheets to stand—naked and swaying—in Auror Malfoy’s cabin.

She had slept with him.

She had *slept with him!*

“Okay,” she whispered frantically, looking for her underwear. “This is fine. People hook up on work trips, this is totally fine—”

Panic, excitement, and shame wrestled for dominance. Hermione’s more evolved sensibilities were trying to say that casual sex was a very empowered and modern thing to do. And that, if anything, a rebound with her handsome coworker was exactly what she needed following her breakup.

The other, more nervous parts of her brain said something like this:

*Would Ron be angry?* Wait, no—that didn’t matter, but—

*What if people found out she’d hooked up with Malfoy, and assumed she’d been cheating on Ron?* Not that it was her fault what assumptions people made, right?

The worried thought she was most ashamed of:

*Would Malfoy wake up and regret what they’d done?*

Would he wake—hair mussed, squinting against the light—and look at her first with confusion... then embarrassment?

Somehow, under all the shame and hungover-ness, that was really the only part of it that made Hermione panic.

Because she liked Malfoy. He was smart, and attractive, and so confident—and she couldn’t bear the prospect of this night changing the way they interacted. He’d respected her. Would all that change?

She imagined—in humiliating, intolerable detail—how he might start avoiding her after this. Or how he might feel obligated to check with her that she ‘knew he didn’t want anything serious right now’.

Hermione yanked on her trousers, her motions growing more frantic by the second. Malfoy made a low noise in his sleep and she winced and tried to dress more quietly.

She was going to be a total grown-up about this. She would leave now, so that they could avoid a possibly awkward morning after conversation. So she wouldn’t have to risk hearing the embarrassed regret in his voice. Maybe they could even pretend it never happened.

Given that it appeared to be mid-morning now, judging by the angle and color of the sunlight through Malfoy’s curtained window, Hermione decided it was too risky to make her exit through the front door. What if Berkon and the rest were outside?

Not feeling nearly as grown up and evolved about this as she was hoping to, Hermione shimmied open Malfoy’s bathroom window and crawled inelegantly out.

~

She took a long shower, swaying slightly in the steam from the force of her hangover—tinged slightly by what was surely still the afterglow of still being drunk.

Hermione remembered bits and pieces of the previous night. She'd been less drunk by the very end, she thought. Because that was where the memories were sharpest.

Malfoy on top of her, his face buried in her neck, whispering about how good she was. How lovely, how sweet, how *darling*.

Her orgasm, climbing and climbing.

The feeling of his heavy body shivering slightly when he finished too—the sound he'd made, that certainly would feature heavily in all Hermione's future fantasies. The faceless, dominant man she always thought of when she touched herself would no longer be an anonymous figure. Surely, she would only think of Malfoy now.

*You want to be good, don't you?*

*Do as you're told.*

Hermione's hand dropped unconsciously between her thighs, where hot water had already cleaned away any trace of what Malfoy had left.

An unwelcome wave of sadness wrapped itself around her.

What a stupid thing it had been, to hook up with him. They'd seemed to be at the beginning of some sort of—warm, admiring friendship. He was solid, and reliable, and Hermione felt so safe and protected around him.

But she'd fucked him, drunk and reckless and sloppy. And now that was all they would ever be.

She leaned her forehead against the cool tile of the shower.

“So stupid,” she whispered. “What a mistake —”

There was a sudden pounding on the cabin door, interrupting her thought. She gasped in shock, then had to hold up a hand to lean against the wall—the room spun nauseatingly.

Trying to will the hangover away, Hermione twisted the shower tap.

“Coming!” she called hoarsely, grabbing a towel. “Just one second—I was in the shower, one second—”

Whoever was at the door was pounding with greater insistence now. Berkon, maybe? What time was it—was she delaying the group's departure?

Hermione didn't bother finishing drying herself. She snatched on her robe and ran to the door—leaving a trail of damp footsteps in her wake—to open it before the knocking could begin anew.

The sunlight was overpowering. Hermione squinted, feeling ill, an apology already prepared in case it was someone from the Runes Department waiting for her.

It wasn't.

Auror Draco Malfoy stood at her door, his hand already half-raised to knock again.

He looked livid—and extremely disheveled.

Malfoy, who never had so much as a strand of hair out of place. Malfoy, who wore sharp dark Auror robes and silver cufflinks—who had gone undefeated in the rookie sparring tournament and been photographed afterwards appearing barely out of breath—was at Hermione's door looking like an absolute wreck.

His shirt hung open, his trousers wrinkled—the same ones from last night, clearly yanked on in a hurry when he realized Hermione was gone.

For a moment, he just stared down at her. His jaw worked violently. Like if he didn't speak, he might chew through his tongue.

“You left,” he finally said.

His voice was hoarse; he was clearly as hungover as she was.

Hermione's eyes went wide. She glanced behind him—and, as she feared, the rest of the camp site was staring at the gossip-worthy sight of a half-dressed Malfoy standing at Translator Granger's door.

“What are you doing?” she whispered. “Malfoy, they're going to know—”

“Why did you leave?”

One of Hermione's colleagues was very not subtly inching closer, clearly trying to listen in.

“Come in,” she said quickly.

Malfoy didn't need to be told twice.

Hermione closed the door, trying to keep her breathing steady. The hangover threatened to knock her over at any moment. She felt unsteady and confused.

It didn't help that all the cabins at the site were identical, so Hermione's was indistinguishable in layout from Malfoy's, where the two of them had drunkenly cavorted the night before.

He'd pinned her against his wall, in this exact spot by the door, she remembered...

“Sit down, Hermione,” Malfoy said. “Right here.”

Hermione, dazed, followed his instruction and took a seat at the kitchen table.

Malfoy paced agitatedly before her, not looking at her yet. His jaw continued to tighten and untighten. Like he was getting ahold of himself.

“I don’t want to frighten you,” he said, stopping abruptly in front of her. “I’m not mad at you, darling. Can you say that back to me?”

“You’re not mad at me,” Hermione whispered.

“Very good. You’re a good girl, you know that?”

Hermione nodded.

“And if you’re a good girl,” he said. “What does that make me? Tell me.”

Hermione didn’t know the answer to this riddle. She didn’t want to disappoint him, so she strained to think.

“A good man,” she said.

“Wrong.”

He walked closer, standing tall over her. He leaned over and braced his hands on the arms of her chair—so close that they could have kissed again if either of them tipped their faces the tiniest bit forward.

“I’m a bad man,” he said softly. “Which is why I’m in here, making you repeat after me, instead of sitting politely in my cabin and wondering why my girl didn’t stay for breakfast.”

He watched her, his eyes narrowed. As though daring her to react in some way to this statement.

Hermione didn’t know if he was maybe expecting her to bristle at this. If he was, he would have been wrong. Her thighs clenched together. That familiar edge of steel in his voice. The fantasy-worthy way he stood over her, with that cold look of command in his eyes that said: *all of my attention is on you. Are you happy now?*

“Say it back to me, please. What am I?”

“You’re a bad man,” Hermione breathed, not looking away from him.

“Yes. A bad man, who woke up this morning with no *good girl* in my bed.”

“I didn’t know you wanted me to stay,” she said, feeling tiny.

Malfoy laughed. But it was a wild sound—tinged with desperation.

“I did,” he said. “I did want you to stay.”

"It's just—" Hermione cleared her throat. "I thought it was a work hookup. Because I just got out of a relationship. And we were so drunk—"

They both looked queasy at even the word. Malfoy swallowed, closing his eyes to collect himself, and said:

"Do you like me?"

"I do. But—but, we work together—and—"

The words wouldn't form properly in her mouth. She started to stammer, feeling dumb and out of her depth.

"That's alright, Hermione," Malfoy's voice came, cutting through her spiraling thoughts. "Go ahead and talk slowly. Tell me how you feel. Don't be anxious."

"I like you," Hermione forced herself to say. "But I don't want it to be weird. I *really like* working with you. You make me feel smart, and special—and the way you talk to me—and I only just broke up with Ron. I'm scared everyone's going to judge—"

She finally trailed off, looking miserably up at Malfoy.

Even now—in a half-buttoned shirt, with the shadow of stubble on his jaw, and in wrinkled trousers—he looked like a man who was in control of exactly everything at all times. It was deeply soothing, to consider the possibility she could just hand these anxieties off to him instead.

"You might have noticed already," Malfoy said finally. "But I'm a little unusual. I like control. Handling things."

Hermione's stomach fluttered. She nodded.

"One of the benefits of being with me would be that you wouldn't need to worry about any of the things you're fretting about right now. Those aren't good girl concerns, darling. Those can be my problems."

Hermione thought she might faint. This was exactly what she wanted, this was the little nucleus of her white-hot, shameful fantasies of that dominant man—the missing piece of her core she'd not known the name of—

She nodded again

"So here's what we're going to do. Are you listening, sweetheart?"

"Yes."

"Yes who?"

"Yes, Draco."

He held her jaw in his hand. He leaned low to kiss her—chaste, brief—on the tip of her nose.

“We’re going to try this again,” he whispered. “I’m going to take you to dinner. Somewhere you’ll like. And it will be our first date. Not casual, Hermione.”

“Yes,” she breathed. “Yes, that sounds so nice.”

“Good. And, one more thing.”

“Yes?”

He leaned in. His eyes were cold and grey and took up her whole field of vision.

“You’re not going to run off while I’m asleep this time,” he said softly. “Because I really, really did not like that. If you leave—you say goodbye first. Like a polite girl. Understand?”

She nodded quickly, her thighs clenching together.

“Y-yes.”

“Can you say: *I promise?*”

“I promise.”

A slight, barely perceptible sigh of relief from Malfoy.

He kissed her forehead, and Hermione glowed.

# Chapter 33

## Chapter Summary



## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Malfoy had gone on somewhere between two and three dozen dates in his life—all in the previous timeline, none worth remembering. Dinner, obligatory conversation, expensive glasses of wine. Sex was expected, efficient and forgettable.

This would not be like those.

Malfoy was quietly nervous as he got ready, for one thing.

Standing before the mirror in his London flat, affixing a silver cufflink to his wrist. Carefully re-remembering to himself all the things Hermione liked, all the things she loved.

There was no room for error. He was so very close.

Malfoy adjusted his sleeves, then glanced up at his reflection to run a hand through his hair.

Behind him, Crow was perched on the black lacquered dresser. The cat's yellow eyes were wide and—probably, Malfoy was projecting—alertly nervous.

*Don't screw this up,* Malfoy imagined Crow saying. *I miss mum.*

Meeting Crow's eyes in the glass, Malfoy was reminded of the time he had once looked up in the mirror to meet a different set of eyes over his shoulder. Hermione had been fiddling with her dress behind him in their closet, all that time ago. Surreptitiously watching him get dressed before the Parkinson-Nott engagement party.

*"You seem almost normal right now,"* she'd said. *"Getting ready for a party like this."*

Malfoy smiled at the memory.

"I'm certainly trying," he said softly, adjusting his tie in the mirror.

He checked his watch.

"We're almost there," Malfoy said, scratching Crow's head. "Wish me luck."

One final glance at his reflection, and Malfoy left. He picked up the bouquet of pink garden roses from where it rested on the credenza on his way out.

~

“Oh, how *beautiful!*”

Hermione pressed her face into the bouquet, inhaling deeply—Malfoy couldn’t help but laugh.

“Sorry,” she said, laughing too. “My gran used to grow roses like this. Big cabbage roses that smell like perfume...”

“That’s lovely. I’ll get you more anytime you like.”

Hermione’s smile widened.

“Let me just run upstairs and put these in the room,” she said, smelling them again. “I’ll just be a sec.”

Malfoy waited for her on the street outside the Leaky Cauldron. He looked up at the windows. She was still staying here—had apparently not yet found a new flat.

She trotted back out the door a moment later and he smiled at her.

“So where are we going for dinner?” she asked brightly.

Malfoy extended his hand and she took it easily, like second nature.

“Faisan,” he said, pointing down the street. “It opened a month ago. Have you been?”

“Oh, definitely not. It’s very posh, isn’t it?”

“I think you’ll like it. I heard there’s a great dessert menu.”

Hermione gave a little *ooh* and started walking faster. Malfoy lengthened his own strides to keep pace, wondering if it was too obvious how much he was leaning on her sweet tooth to gain favor.

But her hand was tightly held in his, and it was hard to think about anything other than the nearly drug-like pleasure of having her again.

At the table, he asked if she wanted him to order for her. The question seemed to elicit embarrassment.

“Um...”

She looked at the menu, a little flush of pink on her cheeks. Extra noticeable in the soft glow of chandelier light.

Faisan was fashionably dimly-lit, but Malfoy had requested a table right under the lamp. He wanted to see her as much as possible.

“That sounds good, actually,” she finally said. “Hopefully you won’t judge me.”

Her tone was playful, as though trying to make sure her comment could pass as a joke.

But Malfoy easily felt the seriousness of the vibration between them. A golden thread, perfect as a major chord drawn from the strings of an instrument.

“Of course not,” he said. “It would make me very happy, if you liked that sort of thing.”

She closed the menu with a relieved smile, and Malfoy marveled at how much things could change while still staying perfectly the same.

She had branzino and a glass of sparkling water with strawberries in it. Malfoy ordered himself steak au poivre and a gin martini.

“I’m surprised you can drink around me after last time,” she said, sipping her strawberry water.

“I found the rest of the night to be well worth the hangover.”

She turned very pink, and Malfoy smiled.

“You’re a smooth talker,” she said, still bright-cheeked. “I feel like you’re probably very popular with women?”

He laughed.

“Are you curious about something?”

“I don’t have a lot of dating experience,” she said, wringing her napkin idly. “Just, you know. Ron. And a few random dates at Hogwarts. So I guess—I’m worried you’re probably used to women who are more familiar with what you like than I am.”

“And what do you think I like?” he asked, amused.

“You know...” Her face was pink. “Just—being in charge?”

“You’re doing a perfect job,” he said. “I couldn’t be happier.”

Hermione smiled, looking flush with relief and pride.

“Let’s get you some dessert,” Malfoy said, gesturing for a waiter. “And then I have an idea for after dinner.”

Hermione had been excited beyond compare at the prospect of meeting Crow.

Malfoy's not-so-subtle goal was to get her to move in with him. But given that this suggestion would likely be met with alarm on their first date, he had decided to couch his efforts in something more palatable.

He felt, perhaps, that he ought to feel shame for so transparently leveraging Crow to win her over.

"I just know he'll love you," Malfoy said, leading Hermione by the hand into the lift. "And he doesn't get to socialize much, since he's an indoor cat. Sometimes he wanders around the building, but that's all."

Hermione looked giddy with excitement.

Malfoy had clocked the nervous way she'd eyed the gloved doorman of his building, and her self-conscious efforts to quiet the noise of her high heels against the white marble floors.

He hoped that being (re)introduced to a cat she loved would soften her impression of Malfoy's flat.

The silver doors of the lift slid quietly open directly into his foyer.

Crow was always in the living room when Malfoy returned home. He had become accustomed to the sight of the cat lounging on the white rug, imperiously refusing to even get to his feet at his master's return.

But Crow had evidently been too impatient to wait in the living room. No sooner had Malfoy and Hermione stepped into the entryway than a black blur of fur appeared out of nowhere to hurl itself with a screeching yowl into Hermione's chest.

The force of Crow's landing sent Hermione stumbling backwards.

She screamed, and there was a gleam of red.

Malfoy's life flashed before his eyes. Was the fucking cat *attacking her*?

He lunged forward to yank Crow away by his tail but realized just in time that the red was not from blood.

Malfoy covered his face with his hands out of a combination of relief and exasperation. Crow had managed to steal a ruby-studded watch from god only knew where. The cat was holding it proudly up to Hermione, the glinting band clamped between white fangs—a welcome home gift.

"I'm so sorry," Malfoy said. Hermione was worryingly silent, crouched on the floor with Crow still clinging to her chest. "He likes sparkly things. I don't know where he got that watch—he's giving it to you like a gift—it's his way of saying that he likes you—"

When Hermione still said nothing, Malfoy leaned low to try to see her face. But it was buried in the cat's soft black side. And her shoulders were shaking.

"Sweetheart? Are you alright—"

"I'm sorry," she said, wiping her eyes. She gave a sobbing laugh. "I have no idea why I'm crying. It's just—he's so wonderful."

Crow butted his glossy black head against her chin, the gem-studded band of the watch still in his mouth. Trying again to get her to accept his no doubt hard-won trophy.

Hermione laughed again, sniffling, and took it from him.

"Thank you, Crow," she said. "What a lovely gift."

"He must have stolen it from someone else in the building," Malfoy said, dropping into a seat on the floor. "He's a menace."

She giggled, wiping her tears.

"You're not a menace," she teased, kissing Crow's little nose. He purred and rubbed his face against her cheek. "I think it's classy, Crow, don't worry. A timepiece is a beautiful gift."

She and Crow remained laminated at each other's sides for the rest of the night.

Although Malfoy had hoped that the reintroduction to Crow would pave the way for Hermione to spend more and more time at his home, it was still a relief when the clock struck two in the morning and she was still curled on his living room rug, drowsily cuddled with Crow.

He sat near them and toyed with a curl of her hair, trying not to be too visibly emotional. Hermione and Crow were here, together. With him.

He took her hand and kissed her palm. Hermione made a sleepy noise of affection.

"I love this," she said, nuzzling into Crow's shoulder. "I feel like I could just stay here forever."

Malfoy squeezed her hand a little tighter but said nothing.

He watched her examine Crow's slim leather collar. She picked up the gold name tag.

"This is so cute," she said. "Draco spoils you, Mr. Crow."

She ran her fingers over the smooth metal, admiring it longer than was normal.

"You like it," Malfoy said.

"Yes. So pretty..."

"I could buy you something pretty too, you know."

Hermione blushed and let go of the tag. She wriggled closer to Malfoy's leg so she could rest her head on his knee.

"Like a necklace?" she asked sleepily.

Malfoy combed his fingers through her hair. His hand shook very slightly, and he fought to keep it steady.

The glinting silver of his signet ring flashed in the light, dipping in and out of view through the brown waves of her curly hair.

If he lowered his hand to encircle her slim throat, he would once more get to see his ring around her neck.

"Yes," he said quietly. "Like a necklace."

She didn't leave all night. He carried her to bed at four in the morning, and woke with his face buried in her neck.

He liked his flat. The kitchen was big, and he imagined bringing back groceries with her. He imagined doing laundry.

But though this building was spacious and comfortable, Malfoy already knew they would not settle here. Because there was one more thing he wanted.

Flat shopping—starter furniture.

Just like she'd always said.

~

*"I don't think you're a bad person, deep down."*

*The comedy of Hermione saying this while she was on guard duty—watching him through iron bars to make sure he didn't do something like break out and murder everyone—seemed lost on her.*

*"Is that right?" Malfoy asked, amused.*

*His cell in the Order safe house was cold and dull, but he always found it more tolerable when sweet, idealistic Hermione was here.*

*"Yes," she said. "Life circumstances aren't always fair. If things were different, you might be—like a Buddhist monk or something. Instead of a Death Eater."*

*"I enjoy earthly pleasures too much to be a monk."*

*Hermione turned pink.*

*"You know what I mean," she said, looking embarrassed.*

*"I do," he said. "Sorry, just teasing. You're easy to fluster."*

*They were silent together for a moment. A comfortable silence. There was over an hour left on Hermione's shift—Malfoy kept close awareness of each minute, like someone constantly checking how many pages were left in a favorite book. Wanting to enjoy every second.*

*"You still have it in you to turn things around, you know," she said.*

*"It's a matter of interest, I think. In that I'm not. I'm far too motivated by my own ambitions to prioritize the greater good."*

*"You really think you're past redemption?"*

*There was concern and genuine curiosity in her voice. Only Hermione Granger could be worried that Malfoy—a convicted criminal—might consider himself evil.*

*He thought about her question deeply, for her sake.*

*Then he shrugged and smiled.*

*"Sorry to disappoint. I'm bad all the way down, I think," he said. "It would have to be an extraordinarily compelling cause—to make me sacrifice everything."*

## Chapter End Notes

Fin.

Thank you so much for reading, it's so crazy to finish the story at last. I hope it brought you joy!! ❤️❤️❤️ It's meant so much to me to write this story and see all of your comments and reactions. love u

If you want, you can find me on socials where I sometimes share updates about new fics and upcoming chapters. I'm [greenFlowerPots on X](#) and [green.flower.pot on IG](#) ❤️

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